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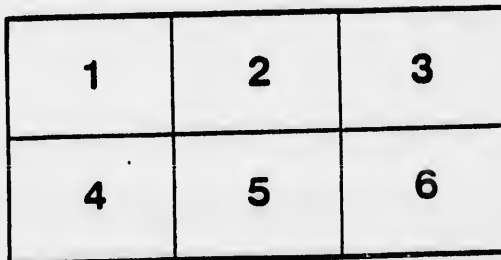
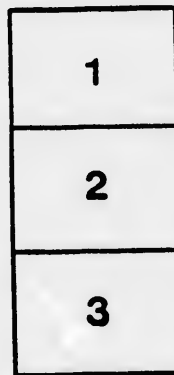
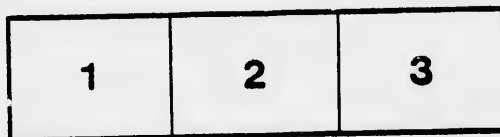
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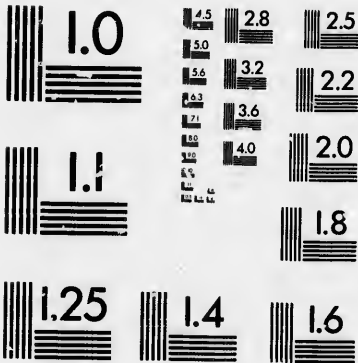
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BERTHA M. CLAY

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THE  
EARL'S ATONEMENT.

BY  
BERTHA M. CLAY,

AUTHOR OF

*"Under a Shadow." "Set in Diamonds." "Between Two Loves." etc.*



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# CONTENTS.

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	PAGE
CHAPTER I.	
THE GERM OF A TRAGEDY.....	9
CHAPTER II.	
THE VILLAGE ANGEL .....	14
CHAPTER III.	
THE SAINT AND THE SINNER.....	18
CHAPTER IV.	
THE FIRST STEP .....	21
CHAPTER V.	
A MAIDEN'S SOUL AWAKES.....	25
CHAPTER VI.	
CONJECTURES AND SUSPICIONS .....	30
CHAPTER VII.	
WARNING VOICES .....	34
CHAPTER VIII.	
THE CONFESSION .....	39
CHAPTER IX.	
LIFE WITHOUT HONOR WORTHLESS .....	44
CHAPTER X.	
THE CRISIS OF HER LIFE .....	48
CHAPTER XI.	
THE TEST OF FAITH .....	50
CHAPTER XII.	
THE BROKEN LILY .....	56

	PAGE
CHAPTER XIII.	
A WOMAN WITHOUT A FEMALE FRIEND .....	60
CHAPTER XIV.	
SIR VANE'S WARNING .....	65
CHAPTER XV.	
'HIS WIFE MUST BE HAPPY.' .....	70
CHAPTER XVI.	
'AN ANGEL AND A COQUETTE' .....	73
CHAPTER XVII.	
'YOU NEVER TELL ME OF YOUR LIFE' .....	77
CHAPTER XVIII.	
THE MARKED HANDKERCHIEF .....	81
CHAPTER XIX.	
IN QUEST OF THE SECRET .....	85
CHAPTER XX.	
'I HOLD HER DEATH WARRANT' .....	90
CHAPTER XXI.	
'NOW I CAN BEAR MY FATE' .....	95
CHAPTER XXII.	
'REAL LOVE BEGINS ON EARTH AND ENDS IN HEAVEN' .....	101
CHAPTER XXIII.	
DISTILLING THE POISON .....	106
CHAPTER XXIV.	
THE COQUETTE'S ADVANCES .....	111
CHAPTER XXV.	
SIR VANE'S UNEASINESS .....	116
CHAPTER XXVI.	
WITH MURDER IN HER HEART .....	121
CHAPTER XXVII.	
A CRUEL LETTER .....	126
CHAPTER XXVIII.	
'YOUR LIFE HAS BEEN A LIVING LIE!' .....	131

CONTENTS.

v

PAGE		PAGE
	CHAPTER XXIX.	
60	A WOMAN CRUSHED TO EARTH .....	136
	CHAPTER XXX.	
65	'YOU HAVE DECEIVED OTHERS, BUT NONE SO CRUELLY AS ME' .....	141
	CHAPTER XXXI.	
70	A LONELY WANDERER.....	146
	CHAPTER XXXII.	
73	A PREMONITION .....	151
	CHAPTER XXXIII.	
77	'YOU HAVE MURDERED HER'.....	155
	CHAPTER XXXIV.	
81	'I HAVE MADE A TERRIBLE MISTAKE' .....	159
	CHAPTER XXXV.	
85	A LADY VISITOR .....	164
	CHAPTER XXXVI.	
90	'I WILL GIVE YOU CAUSE TO REMEMBER ME'.....	169
	CHAPTER XXXVII.	
95	A WOMAN SCORNEO .....	174
	CHAPTER XXXVIII.	
101	THE CRY OF AN ANGUISHED HEART .....	179
	CHAPTER XXXIX.	
106	'I HAVE BEEN SINNEO AGAINST'.....	184
	CHAPTER XL.	
111	A PROPOSAL REJECTED .....	189
	CHAPTER XLI.	
116	A HOUSE WITH A MYSTERY .....	195
	CHAPTER XLII.	
121	THE HUSBAND'S JOKE.....	200
	CHAPTER XLIII.	
126	A WOMAN'S TERRIBLE VENGEANCE .....	206
	CHAPTER XLIV.	
131	FALSE AND TRUE LOVE .....	211

	PAGE
CHAPTER XLV.	
BUT FOR HER I WOULD HAVE BEEN A HAPPY WIFE.....	216
CHAPTER XLVI.	
THE JOKE THAT PARIS ENJOYED .....	221
CHAPTER XLVII.	
THE SPELL OF A BEAUTIFUL FACE .....	226
CHAPTER XLVIII.	
A DISFIGURED FAVORITE .....	232
CHAPTER XLIX.	
HOW IT WAS DONE.....	237
CHAPTER L.	
THE DEPLORABLE CONSEQUENCES .....	239
CHAPTER LI.	
IN A NEW HOME .....	247
CHAPTER LII.	
'TO LOVE, TO SUFFER, AND TO DIE' .....	252
CHAPTER LIII.	
'MY HEART WENT OUT TO HIM' .....	256
CHAPTER LIV.	
'YOUR EYES TELL ME ONE STORY, AND YOUR LIPS ANOTHER' 261	
CHAPTER LV.	
'ANYTHING CAN BE FORGIVEN TO A MAN WITH SUCH A RENT- ROLL' .....	264
CHAPTER LVI.	
'LIFE WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN' .....	271
CHAPTER LVII.	
'I SHOULD LIKE TO KNOW EVERYTHING ABOUT HIM' .....	276
CHAPTER LVIII.	
'I WISH I COULD ALWAYS BE NINETEEN .....	279
CHAPTER LIX.	
'HE HAD SLAIN HER, BUT SHE LOVED HIM' .....	286

PAGE  
... 216  
... 221  
... 226  
... 232  
... 237  
... 239  
... 247  
... 252  
... 256  
... 261  
... 264  
... 271  
... 276  
... 279  
... 286

CONTENTS.

vii  
PAGE

CHAPTER LX.  
' AS THOUGH SOME GREAT WEIGHT WERE ON HIS MIND ' ..... 291

CHAPTER LXI.  
A SOLEMN WARNING ..... 296

CHAPTER LXII.  
THE WHISPERING VOICE ..... 301

CHAPTER LXIII.  
LIKE A DAGGER IN HER HEART..... 306

CHAPTER LXIV.  
AS SHE LOOKED THEN SHE NEVER LOOKED AGAIN ..... 310

CHAPTER LXV.  
A FOLLY OR A CRIME ..... 316

CHAPTER LXVI.  
' LET HIM DENY IT IF HE CAN ' ..... 321

CHAPTER LXVII.  
DOOMED TO A LIFE-LONG SORROW ..... 326

CHAPTER LXVIII.  
THE FATHER'S EXPLANATION..... 332

CHAPTER LXIX.  
NIGHT FOR EVERMORE ..... 335

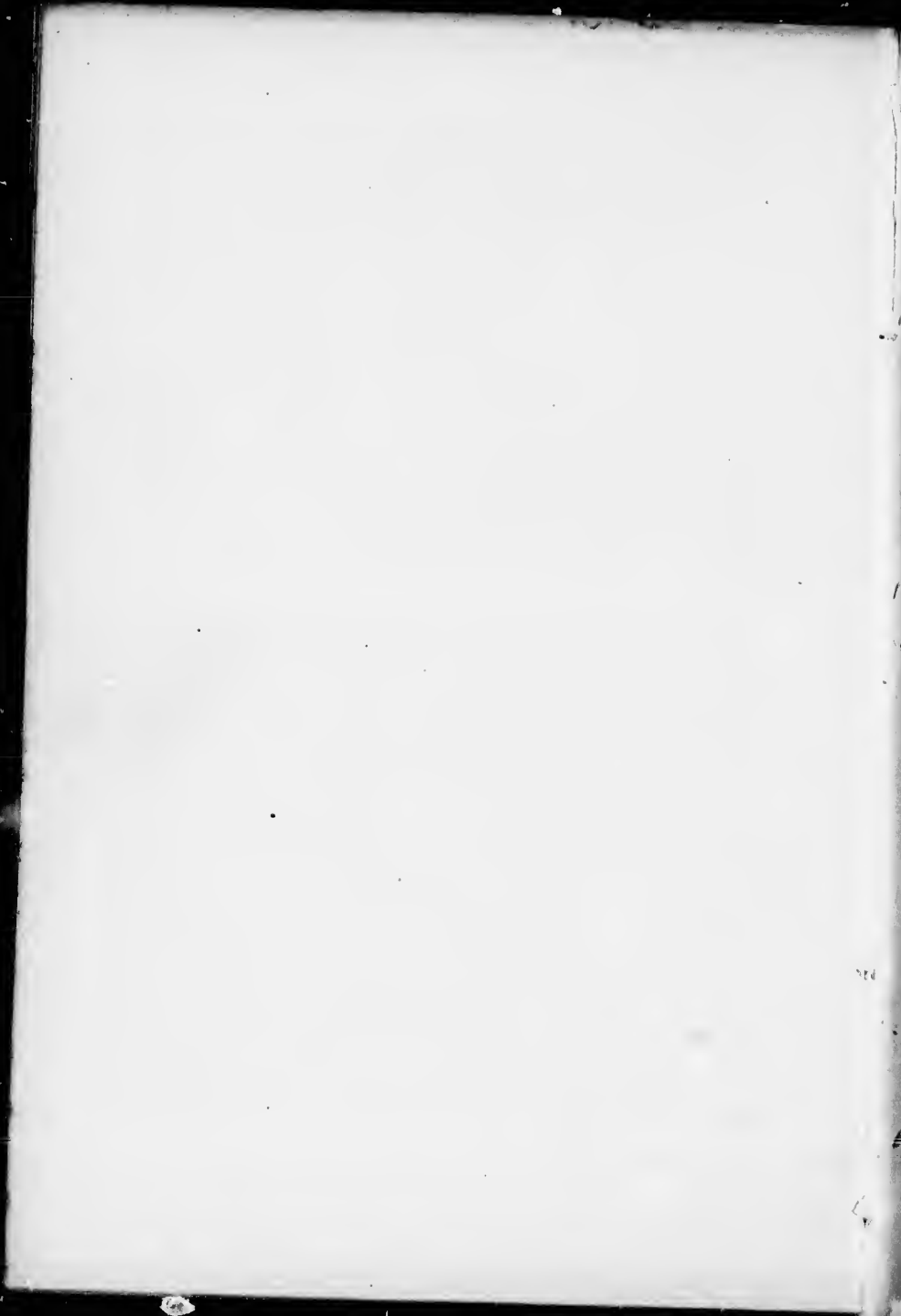
CHAPTER LXX.  
A LAST REQUEST ..... 342

CHAPTER LXXI.  
' I TOUCH THE HANDS OF MEN OF HONOR ' ..... 347

CHAPTER LXXII.  
THE VICTIM OF A MAN'S SINS..... 352

CHAPTER LXXIII.  
' ANGEL OF MY LIFE, COME BACK TO ME ! ' ..... 357

CHAPTER LXXIV.  
THE EARL'S ATONEMENT ..... 360




s  
f  
s  
l  
v  
s  
t  
t  
n  
i  
o  
s

# THE EARL'S ATONEMENT.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE GERM OF A TRAGEDY.

 NOBLER girl had never lived than she whose saintly face and saintly ways were so appreciated that in the vicinity of her abode she was known as 'the village angel.' Yet she was of humble origin, the daughter of a poor doctor.

He was a struggling country surgeon, with a small income, the reward of very hard work—a man of no particular family, with no great connections, of no influence—a man content to wear thick leather shoes, a somewhat shabby coat, and frayed gloves; a country surgeon, working hard for his daily bread, and finding that difficult to win; a man whose daily routine never varied, and who would one day pause in his work to die, and the world would know him no more.

And she was his only daughter—'only a doctor's daughter,' as Sir Vane Carlyon said, over and over again to himself; no fortune save the praise and love of all who knew her, no dowry save the blessings of the poor. Nothing but her fair, girlish loveliness and sweet, pure character; among other girls she was what a white lily is among other flowers.

One drop of water in the great, deep ocean, one grain of sand on the vast sea-shore; one leaf in the boundless forest is to Sir Vane Carlyon of quite as much importance as the doctor's daughter. She is one in a world of women, one out of the millions of fair girls, differing only from the others in that she is fairer and more graceful—true, sweet, and pure as the petals of a white lily.

He thinks idly to himself, as he watches her. 'Shall he seek to win her, or shall he pass her by?'



The world is full of fair girls, who would smile on the possessor of such broad lands ; there is no particular reason for wishing to win her, except that it would be a novel sensation to wake up into fervent, passionate love for the beautiful, dreamy soul shrined in that fair body ; a new sensation to quench the light of holiness and truth in the grave, sweet violet eyes, and fill them with the fire of love or the lurid light of passion ; a new sensation to touch the sweet lips that now dropped words of gentle wisdom, to utter passionate words that tell of love ; to wake the soul—filled now with the rapturous love of heaven—to the pains and pleasures, the ecstasy of earthly love.

Quite a novel sensation—the only question was—should he give himself the trouble—was anything on earth worth the fatigue and anxiety it would cost him ? Would love even ever so sweet and deep repay him ? In idle mood, with the cane he held listlessly in his hand, he struck down the fair blossoms of the wild celandine among which he stood.

What was she, after all, but a fair flower, growing in the green heart of the land, to be struck down and slain by the hand of man, if he willed it ?

He had had more love affairs, more intrigues, more flirtations than he could remember ; he had forgotten even the names of the women he had loved ; he had loved fair and beautiful brunettes, good and simple girls, heartless flirts. If a face attracted him, he had never resisted the attraction ; but he had seen nothing, no one like this doctor's daughter, with her dowry of beauty and grace. She was like a new creation to him ; he had heard her praises wherever he went ; he had watched her, and owned to himself no other girl was half so fair.

Should he, who had never refused himself any wish that he had formed, who had never let a woman's heart or a woman's honor interfere with his follies—should he win her or let her pass by ?

As he watched her the blue sky shone above his head, and the golden light of the sun lay round him ; the summer wind brought every sweet odor from fields and meadows ; the great branches of the lime trees swayed gently to and fro ; the birds sang ; but not one of these sweet voices of nature spoke to

him—he was deaf to them, one and all; he thought only whether he should take the trouble to win this girl, who looked fair and pure, as though her heart was in Heaven.

A question of little moment to him—at the utmost it meant remaining some weeks longer at Whitcroft; then probably going abroad, and the expenditure of a few thousand pounds.

To her it meant life or death, honor or dishonor, heaven or the everlasting darkness of the outcast.

The sweet flowers of the celandine fell to the right and the left, as he struck them recklessly with his cane. He looked once more at the face of the doctor's daughter—the golden hair was like a halo round it: from out of the violet eyes shone the truth, tenderness and purity of a loving soul—the mouth had the sweet, pathetic, graceful lines one sees in the portrait of Beatrice Cenci; the delicate, graceful curves of the head and neck, the slender, faultless figure, instinct with grace and refinement, made a picture that was seldom equalled.

She had been playing the organ at the church, and was busily engaged in locking the worn old door, when he, passing up to the vicarage, saw her, and stood watching her.

'How love would disfigure that face,' he said to himself. 'The people round here call her a saint. It will be a novelty to make love to a saint. I will stay.' Away went the smiling heads of the celandine, with another vigorous stroke of the stick. 'I will stay,' he repeated: and in those three words lay the germ of a tragedy, the death-warrant of the sweetest, brightest of human creatures—the death-knell of a human soul!

She was still struggling with the key; it would not lock the old worm-eaten door, and her white, slender fingers were red and bruised.

'Man makes his own opportunities, or mars them,' said Sir Vane Carlyon—'this is mine, and I will make it.'

He crossed the church-yard. Even if one of the quiet dead had risen from his grave to give him solemn warning, it would not have turned him from his purpose—once formed, nothing ever did. He was standing by her side the next moment, hat in hand, and the sunlight never fell on a handsomer face—dark, brilliant, proud, and full of power, a face fatal in its irresistible beauty.

'I beg your pardon,' he said, 'but that door seems to give

you a great deal of trouble. If it be necessary to lock it, allow me to do it for you.'

'I shall be very grateful,' she replied. 'The lock is rusty, and I cannot turn the key.'

There was no blush, no flutter of gratified vanity, no attempt at even the least flirtation. She was 'calm as a sculptured saint;' the color on the sweet, modest face deepened a little as she gave the key into his hand. It was only a matter of course that she should pretend to find it even more difficult than it was.

'Why is it needful to lock this door? You have no thieves in this part of the world?' he said.

'No, no thieves, but there are plenty of children,' she said, 'and when the doors are left open they will go in to rest in the cool, shady church, or to play at hide-and-seek in the pews. Neither the rector nor Lady Anne Ruthven likes it.'

'I should say not,' he cried; 'dirty little urchins like those.'

Her face fell: he saw the expression change, and his dark eyes devoured its fair, gentle loveliness.

'They are not all dirty little urchins,' she said, in a voice of gentle reproach. 'I think the children of Whitecroft are healthy, strong, sturdy girls and boys.'

He made a gesture that implied contempt, although he did not express it. She replied to the gesture with a faint flush.

'Even if they are dirty each one has a soul.'

He looked at her in wonder.

'A soul!' he repeated: 'the idea had not occurred to me, but of course they have. I have really never thought of souls in connection with village children.'

The sweet, grave violet eyes looked at him with attention.

'I think the soul of a child is the most beautiful thing in creation,' she said, softly. 'It is the one thing nearest and dearest to Heaven.'

She had been struck with his face, beautiful as that of a young Apollo, but a shadow of disappointment lay now in the lustrous eyes. That he should not know the value of the soul even of a village child, lowered him in her sight; but having made an opportunity of speaking to her, he had no wish to pursue this style of conversation. It was neither of village children nor of souls he desired to speak.

'I am afraid the rector must go to the expense of a new lock,' he said, 'this will not last much longer. I shall beg the old one when it is done with.'

'Why?' she asked, with the simple wonder of a child.

'Because it has brought about that which I most heartily desired,' he replied; 'an introduction to you.'

There was not the least affectation, nor the faintest approach to coquetry in her manner—the grave, sweet simplicity charmed him as nothing had ever done before.

'Do you wish to know me? How strange!' she said.

'I do not think it strange. I think it perfectly natural. I saw you first in church, three weeks since, and I have been longing ever since to know you.'

Not the faintest gleam of coquetry came in the eyes or face; he watched her keenly to see if his flattering words produced any effect upon her—he could see none; she did not seem even to understand that it was flattery—she took it as the announcement of a fact, nothing more.

'I am a very easy person to know,' she replied. 'I think every one in Whitecroft knows me.'

'Then every one in Whitecroft is singularly blessed and happy,' he said: 'I wish I were one of them. I do not belong to Whitecroft.'

She looked at him, taking in with one comprehensive glance the handsome, aristocratic face, the tall, well-knit figure, the air of superiority—then smiled thoughtfully.

'You do not certainly belong to Whitecroft,' she said; 'we have no one like you. Our people are all poor and hard-working.'

'I am neither, you think?'

'I am quite sure,' she replied, with a charming little nod of her head.'

By this time he had been obliged, sorely against his will, to lock the door. He had intended to ask her if she would meet him again, if he might walk across the fields with her; but as she stood in the shadow of the old gray porch, the thick green ivy making the background of the picture, the sunlight falling on her face, on her pale golden hair, and the gray cloak she wore, she looked so young, so pure, so far above the earth, so like what he had seen in pictures of the angels, that his cour-

age failed him; he dared not even hint at making an appointment with her. The nearest attempt possible was to ask her if she had been playing the organ, and she answered yes. when she had any leisure she spent it in that manner.

'There is nothing,' he said, 'that I love like music, and the organ seems to me the most perfect of instruments. Do you go every day?'

'That would presuppose a good deal of leisure,' she replied. 'No, not every day. On Thursday I give several hours to it; and she had not the faintest idea why he smiled.

He thought to himself that the boundary line was very narrow between the excess of innocence and the excess of art.

This was Tuesday, and he would see her again on Thursday. With a few courteous words he bade her good-by, and went home to dream of a fair, pure face and a halo of golden hair, like the angels in the pictures—and a face into which he longed to put the light and glow of human love.

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## CHAPTER II.

### THE VILLAGE ANGEL.

EVERY one in Whitecroft knew and loved the 'doctor's daughter.' There was no one like her, and none of them remembered ever to have seen any one like her. She had grown up in the pretty village without ever leaving it; she belonged to it, and the old gray church and the pretty river Revel did—as the quaint old houses with overhanging eaves, and the green lanes, with the tall hedgerows, did. No one ever spoke of Whitecroft without making Agatha Brooke, the doctor's daughter, the principal subject of conversation.

Many long years had passed since Dr. Brooke came to Whitecroft. He was quite a young man then, with his life lying before him. He liked the country much better than the town, and thought Whitecroft the prettiest part of the country he had ever seen.

He went to live there. When Dr. Sleigh died, he bought his pretty house and the old-fashioned garden, with its spreading sycamore trees—a pretty house, that looked as though it were dressed in flowers, shaded with rippling foliage bright with gleams of scarlet and gold; roses and passion-flowers climbed the walls, framed the windows, clustered over the porch, where, in summer, it was pleasant to sit and watch the butterflies, the bees, and birds.

People at first thought him too young, but after a time they discovered that he was much older than his years—that he was gentle, studious and kindly of heart; rather absent-minded, and easily imposed upon; kind to the poor, and as much interested in saving the life of the poorest woman or child as though he had a duchess for a patient.

Dreamy, and in many ways unpractical, he was earnestly devoted to his profession; and if ever he thought of himself at all, it was to believe that he had been sent expressly into the world to heal the diseases and assuage the pains of mankind. In a very short time the simple, kindly young doctor won the heart of the whole village; men, women, and children all loved him, trusted him, believed in him and sought him in all troubles. He married the village beauty, Laura Ennis, and they were the happiest pair in the world. She was the brightest, merriest doctor's wife, and their little daughter Agatha was like a sunbeam.

Rather suddenly a terrible accident happened, which plunged the whole village into mourning, and blighted the doctor's life. He had been appointed medical officer for a somewhat straggling country district, and in consequence had been obliged to purchase a little carriage and pony. When the pony was not required for duty Mrs. Brooke liked to drive her pretty little daughter through the green lanes; but one day a terrible accident happened. She was driving to Westbury, along the high-road, talking to little Agatha about the lovely sights and scenes around them, when suddenly along the white, straight road she saw a wagonette with two unmanageable horses speeding toward her.

She did the best she could; with a white face and beating heart she told her little girl not to cry, there was nothing wrong; she drew the pony near o the hedge, and waited in

terrified silence for the passing of the infuriated horses. It was all over before any one knew what had happened; and the immediate cause of the accident was never clearly ascertained, only this, that the little pony, in its turn, took fright and overturned the carriage on a heap of stones; little Agatha rolled safely down a grass bank, the doctor's fair young wife fell with her head on the stones, and never spoke again.

Death was such a strange, grim visitor in the bright, flowery cottage—the rooms never looked the same again: the world was never the same to him, the brightest and fairest of creatures had gone from it, leaving it dark and cold. In time the smart of his pain had passed, and he talked and laughed like others, but the cold chill of desolation never left him. It was strange that he did not seek comfort in the beautiful child left to him. He loved her with a very great love, but he grew more dreary and more absent-minded as the years rolled on. How many people live on with a dead heart! He did; he devoted himself to his duties. Behind him lay an island of delight, at which he seldom looked, because the sunlight dazzled his eyes; before him stretched out the great, dark sea, called eternity, on the distant golden shore of which stood his fair, well-loved wife. While crossing that sea, if he could heal the frail, ailing bodies and cheer the fainting hearts of his kind, he was glad to do it.

The child Agatha was a wonderful child, beautiful as an angel, with the same pure, bright face one sees in the pictures of the angels; a graceful head, covered with curls of pale gold, and eyes like 'violets steeped in dew,' shining always with pity and compassion almost divine. All the overflowing love and tenderness, the grand compassion, the loving pity that had filled her mother's heart had come to her, and with it her father's instinct for helping and healing every creature who required it.

When she was a grave, sweet mite of seven or eight, the doctor talked to her about all the little children who were ill; at that early age the sweet, angelic disposition showed itself: she saved every little delicacy given to her for the little ones lying with aching head or injured limbs. It was the prettiest sight in the world to see the lovely child, with her hair of pale gold, going into the cottages, her little hands laden with gifts,

'Who is that?' strangers asked, and the answer was always the same.

'Only the doctor's daughter.'

And the doctor's daughter had grown up the village angel; even her beautiful name seemed part of herself. The old gray church, with its ivy-covered porch, built hundreds of years ago, had been dedicated to St. Agatha. Who St. Agatha was the village people did not know—they had never asked. On the great stained-glass window at the eastern end of the church, there was a picture of her, a beautiful, fair young maid, with a pure, sweet face, and a halo round the hair of pale gold; she carried a palm branch in her hand; but what the palm branch meant they never understood.

The most curious thing was that Mrs. Brooke loved the old stained-glass window, with its fair young saint, and her seat in the church was exactly opposite to it. When the pretty girl-baby was placed in her arms, and she saw the pale gold of the hair, and the tiny fair face, she said to her husband, 'Let me call her Agatha,' and he was willing. So that the very name was an additional charm in the eyes of the simple people, and the doctor's daughter, in some inexplicable way, was to them part of the church, and associated with the mysterious Agatha, whose sweet, saintly face shone on them every Sunday.

The strangest thing was the influence it had on the child itself. She was the only Agatha in the village, and she had been named after the beautiful lady who carried the branch of palm in her hand. She asked about her, and the doctor told her that Saint Agatha had been one of those who refused to deny God and worship idols, and for that reason the pagan judge had ordered her to be put to death, and the memory of her had lived in the hearts of the people ever since. Young, fair, delicate, fragile, beautiful, she had preferred the agonies of death to the denial of God.

There was a grand lesson in the old stained-glass window for those who cared to read it. The little Agatha did care to read it, and the village people said, as she grew older, she resembled the old picture more and more.

There was no great provision made for education at Whitecroft, but Agatha received the best there was; the doctor gave her Latin lessons and taught her the elements of science; the



old organist at the church taught her music. Nature had given her a voice sweet and clear as the carol of a bird; she sang as the birds sing, because her heart was full of music, and she could not help it.

So she grew up among them, fresh and fair as any white lily. The world—with its follies, its gayeties, its pleasures, its light loves, its passions, its tragedies—was all unknown to her who lived in the pure atmosphere of goodness and charity.

How would the struggle between her and one like Sir Vane Carlyon end? It was more pitiful than the deadly fray between hawk and wounded dove.

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### CHAPTER III.

#### THE SAINT AND THE SINNER.

**S**IR VANE CARLYON had had the world at his feet from the time he lay in his cradle. He was born in the purple, for his father died in Rome, of malaria, some three months before he was born, and his mother, a gentle, pious, refined lady, had devoted her life to her son. She had made only one mistake—she had completely spoiled him; and he grew up handsome, selfish, fond of luxury, impatient of control, obstinate and proud. He had some good qualities; he loved his mother; he was generous even to a fault; he could not see oppression or injustice in others; he never told a falsehood where truth could be managed; he had grown up to consider that the world was made for him. He was Sir Vane Carlyon, of Garswood; he owned Silverdale Abbey; Silverdale House, one of the fairest mansions in Belgravia, belonged to him; he was a power in the land, for he owned some of the largest coal mines in England and drew a large revenue from them. His charities were princely, even as his revenue; his estates were well-managed; he was by no means a man of pleasure, a follower of fashion; considering that he had been

trained by the sweetest and best of mothers, he was wanting in reverence and loyalty towards women. Perhaps it was as much the fault of those who pursued him as his own, for during many years he had been the most eligible match in England, and had been courted as such. Everything possible, and even at times the impossible, had been done to win him, but in vain. He had broken the heart of more than one woman; his own had never even been touched. He admired, made love, and rode away. No matter if he left an aching heart or a shadowed life behind him, that never troubled him.

There were one or two women who cursed the hour in which his handsome face had smiled on them to their destruction. One or two sins were laid to his door that caused the world to shrug its shoulders, and murmur some very apologetic sentences about wild oats.

'He would marry and settle some day,' the matrons said to each other, and in the meantime they must be indulgent to the faults of a fashionable sinner, whose income could not be less than two hundred thousand pounds per annum? He was the pride of the day, but as yet he had loved no one. His mother, Lady Carlyon, wished him to marry, but he had seen no woman, however, fair, whom he felt inclined to call his wife.

In this discontented frame of mind he went to pay a promised visit to Lord Croft, of Whitecroft Abbey, a grand old house some five miles distant from the village, and three miles from the pretty country town of Westbury. Lord and Lady Croft had frequently invited him, and in an evil hour he went.

The visit was pleasant enough, with only one drawback in his eyes. Lady Croft was a great lover of the proprieties, and she liked all her visitors to attend church on Sunday morning; there was no getting off comfortably with a cigar, no pretence of letters availed, and Sir Vane found himself obliged to do as others did. He had showed some hesitation and desire to get out of it, but Lady Croft looked him straight in the face.

'You can please yourself,' she said; 'there is no compulsion; but I think when a man has enjoyed himself, served himself all the week round, if he cannot give at least two hours on Sunday to the worship of his God, he is not worth much.'

Straight words that came to him like a blow in the face,

He went, and in his heart respected Lady Croft ever afterward. He went, but it was a fatal hour which took him to the beautiful old church of St. Agatha. Outwardly he was reverent enough, inwardly he was in search of something to amuse himself with.

The rector who conducted the service, the Reverend Francis Ruthven, was a gentleman from whom no one had ever yet gleaned the least amusement; his wife, who sat in the vicarage pew, kindly, fussy, busy Lady Anne, looking about her with keen eyes, noticed the languor of the handsome young baronet, and thought in her heart how she should like to wake him up. When he has reviewed all the people before him, he sees, in the distance, a beautiful window which attracts his wandering eyes. He does not know what it represents, but the colors are rich, harmonious, beautiful. He knows that the window is a work of art, and gradually his attention is drawn to the fair, pure face of the principal figure there—the face and figure of a fair young saint, who carries a palm branch in her hand.

He looks at it steadily for some few minutes, thinking how beautiful it is, and if goodness made woman so beautiful what a sad pity they were not all good.

His eyes wander on, and he sees, underneath the window, a face and figure so like the one there that he is startled; a figure clad in soft gray kneels there, a slender figure, every line of which is grace; the face is fair, pure, bright as the face in the window, and the pale golden hair makes a halo round it. He is startled for a minute, thinking almost that the girl with the palm branch has descended, but another glance shows him this perfectly beautiful and exquisite face is living.

As a matter of course, at the earliest opportunity he inquired after her, and heard the pathetic little story of her mother's death—heard how the young mother had loved the old gray church, and had named her baby girl Agatha after the figure in the stained-glass window; he heard how she was called the 'doctor's daughter,' and how, as she passed through the streets, men, women and children blessed her.

Every one seemed delighted in awarding praise to Agatha, and this made Vane the more anxious to know her. Her name pleased him; there was a musical ripple about it that

caught his fancy. In his mind insensibly the two faces and the two stories became associated. When he thought of Agatha, the doctor's daughter, he thought also of the Christian martyr who lived in the hearts of the people, and who died rather than deny God. The two faces ever in his mind were often one.

The chance to speak to her came at last, when, on the road to the vicarage, he saw her trying vainly to lock the old church door. After he had spoken to her, after he had seen the liquid depths of her lustrous eyes, the exquisite loveliness of the fair young face, the sweetness of the lips, whose smile was sunlight, he made up his mind. He should stay and woo her. There would be a certain piquancy about wooing a saint.

How it would end he did not know—did not care; it was the fancy of a moment. He never once said to himself—how will it end.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### THE FIRST STEP.

**A**GATHA Brooke went on with her work that day. She performed precisely the same duties, she visited the same houses, she spoke to the same people, she talked to her father over his tea; but all the time there was upon her the strange sensation of some novelty in her life. Something had quickened her pulse; something had stirred the sweet calm of her nature—a thrill of new life, the first faint dawn of the human on a nature that had been all spiritual. The dark eyes so full of admiration, had reached the heart that had as yet known nothing but the spirit of peace.

She never thought of Thursday as an appointment; she never thought that he would be there; she did not think even of meeting him again. All that she was conscious of was the brightening of her life and everything around her.

It was an old custom of hers to give every Thursday afternoon to the organ. This Thursday was a bright, beautiful day.

The month of blossoms, 'Merrie May,' was in its prime, the hedges covered with hawthorn, the lime-trees in blossom, the promise of the lilac and the gleam of the laburnum, the meadows filled with clover, the fields with buttercups and daisies, until they looked like a sea of white and gold.

The song of the birds, the cooing of the ring-dove, the carol of the lark as it soared into the blue ether, filled the sweet spring air; and when Agatha Brooke stepped from the cool shade of the church porch into the paradise of sight and sound, her eyes were dazed for a few minutes by the brightness of the light. Then, when the daze cleared away, she saw standing before her the same stranger.

He bowed to her in the most respectful manner, then stood, hat in hand, his handsome head bent in almost lowly homage before her.

'I fear that I am most unfortunate,' he said, 'I had hoped to have the great pleasure of hearing the organ to-day, but you have finished.'

She answered his bow with a bright smile, and then he saw the capabilities of her face. The smile brightened and beautified it, until, in his turn, his eyes were dazed. If one frank, bright smile so transfigured her, what would love do? She looked half hesitatingly at him.

'If you really wish to hear the organ, I will go back and play something for you.'

'I should like it,' he replied, 'better than anything in the world; but I do not like troubling you.'

'It will be a pleasure to me,' she replied. 'I have been to another world all the afternoon—the old Hebrew world, with Samson and Delilah, Manoah and Micah. This present world of gold and green seemed unreal to me.'

'Yet it is the selfsame whereon grand old Samson lost his sight for a woman's sake.'

'Yes, she murmured: 'but Delilah is dead.'

'There are plenty of Delilah's living,' he said; and she looked at him with grave reproach on her most beautiful face.

'I do not think so,' she replied, 'I do not believe that more than one ever existed.'

He laughed aloud; then stopped abruptly, when he saw the pain on her face.

'I honor such beautiful faith,' he said.

But she did not quite understand even that. Delilahs were not in her line; and it was natural to her to believe in everything. They left the glowing sunlight and the scented lime-blossoms, and went back into the cool, deep shadows of the old church.

'If you want to hear the organ to perfection,' said Agatha, 'it will be much better for you to remain down here in the church, and I will play to you.'

He answered cheerfully, but a strange pang of disappointment shot through his heart. She did not care then for a *tete-a-tete* with him; it was the music, and nothing more; whereas he really cared nothing for the music, and only wanted to be with her. He remained below in the dim, beautiful old church, his eyes riveted on the grand eastern window, listening to the light footsteps, wondering a little, touched a little, finding the circumstances and surroundings quite different to any he had ever known before.

And there through the cool shadows, floated to him sounds almost divine—the pleading cry of Delilah. 'Hear me—but hear me—hear the voice of love.' It was so perfectly rendered he could almost hear the voice, and the voice seemed full of tears. What a grand old story it was; and this girl, who expressed Delilah's love and woe so perfectly, did not believe the type of woman existed in those days. Knowing what he had planned in his heart the plaintive cry touched him. It should have been, 'spare me!' not 'hear!'

Something better and holier woke in his heart than had ever taken root there yet. Should he spare her, who had spared no one yet? Should he go out from the church, and never look at the exquisite face—a girl, [a child almost, who had faith in all women, and, perhaps, in all men. It was like tearing the brilliant wings of a butterfly, or putting out the bright eyes of a little singing bird—there was a sense of cruelty about it. The world was so full of others, why should he seek this one, guarded by her own innocence? Was it possible that, standing under the light of the eastern window, listening to harmony, such as he had seldom heard before, was it possible that in his heart there arose a half wish that he was a better man?

Then the harmony changed, and he knew the words that went to the beautifully pathetic air—'While I have eyes, he wants no light.' The music seems to roll in waves through the dim aisles. Ah, there was indeed a world he had not reached, a world in which this girl lived.

'While I have eyes he wants no light.'

He repeated the words over and over again, and then the music stopped, the old Hebrew world faded away, the light footsteps were descending.

She was pale, and he saw that the little hands holding the great iron key trembled.

'Allow me to lock the door for you,' he said, 'that was your difficulty last week—a very happy difficulty. I remember I heard you say that you should be here on Thursday; and, as I longed to hear the beautiful old organ I thought I would come.'

Then she looked up at him, with innocent surprise in her most beautiful eyes.

'Did you come on purpose?' she asked.

The simplicity of the words amused him so greatly, that he laughed.

'I did, indeed and I would go ten thousand times as far for the same pleasure,' he said. 'You are going across the fields, may I go with you?'

She was too much surprised to say 'yes,' or 'no,' but when she opened the white gate that led from the church-yard to the fields, he went with her. No sense of impropriety came to her—the ways of life at Whitecroft were tolerably free and easy; she did not know what either propriety or etiquette required, for such a case had never happened in her experience before—a handsome, lordly young stranger offering to walk through the fields with her.

He had gained the first step, he thought to himself—permission to be with her, but he was at a loss what to say. To any one else, he would have paid extravagant compliments, made violent love. This girl's modest, graceful calm awed him. While with her and near her he felt as though he were in a shrine, the sanctity of which he dared not desecrate. Still he must talk to her.

'Why is this place called Whitecroft?' he asked.

She was quite at home with him then.

'Look round and see if you can guess,' she replied.

He looked round, but saw no reason.

She laughed again.

'Your eyes are not educated for the country,' she said; 'do you not see all the white blossoms, the hawthorn, the May, the cherry trees, pear trees, the whole village is a mass of lovely white bloom, and that is why it is called Whitecroft. My road is down this lane. I will say good afternoon,' and with a graceful bend of her fair head she disappeared.

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## CHAPTER V.

### A MAIDEN'S SOUL AWAKES.

THREE weeks had passed since Agatha Brooke had played the grand music of Samson, thinking it the greatest treat she could offer. May had passed, and the beautiful month of June, with its glory of flowers and foliage, was here.

Then came a lovely sunny day when Sir Vane stopped to ask himself if he had made much progress, for in spite of three weeks' wooing such as he had never undertaken before, it was still quite uncertain whether he should win or lose her.

He had owned to himself frankly, more than once, that if he had known none but such women as Agatha Brooke, he should have been a different man. Not even in the presence of the best born and noblest ladies in the land had he felt more respect, more reverence than he did for this young girl who was as unconscious of all peril as the wild roses that grew on the hedges. He had wooed her in the most chivalrous fashion. At first, all his meetings with her seemed quite accidental, but it was wonderful how frequent they were. He seemed always to have calls to make at Westbury, and took any amount of exercise in the green lanes and fields around Whitecroft. Then



he was always so deferential, so full of homage and reverence ; every meeting seemed so accidental that she had not the faintest suspicion. Every day life grew more sweet, the sunlight more golden ; every day the faint dream grew deeper ; every day she rose with new hope, new lightness, new beauty, and the vague happiness that filled her heart made her so beautiful that the village people looked at her in wonder. She would have recoiled with something like fear had any one said to her abruptly that she was beginning to love ; to her innocent mind love was a far-off mystery. She never connected it with the dreamy delight that was changing and coloring the whole world for her.

Then what Sir Vane considered a piece of good fortune happened to him. He sprained a finger, and one fine morning he came riding into Westbury and drew his reins at the doctor's door. He set in his card, with a message that he should be glad if the doctor would see him at once, as he had an engagement, and very soon they stood face to face—the handsome young aristocrat, who knew no law but his own will and pleasure, and the village doctor, kind, generous, absent-minded, and unsuspecting.

The sprain was painful, and the doctor wanting something, as usual called for his daughter. She came in, looking, to his mind, more than ever like the saint on the eastern window, for she wore a pale-blue dress, and her golden hair hung loosely on her neck. When she saw him there, in her father's surgery, talking quite at his ease, a sudden sense of bewilderment seized her. In a few brief words the doctor asked for what he wanted ; but Sir Vane interrupted him.

'I have never had the pleasure of a formal introduction to Miss Brooke,' he said ; 'but I was fortunate enough to be of some little assistance over locking the church door.'

And then, while the doctor attended to the finger, Sir Vane told him of the little adventure, and how he had afterwards enjoyed the music of the beautiful oratorio. His conscience almost smote him when he looked into the dreamy, absent face of the girl's father, for the doctor saw so little in it, and thought so little of it, he paid but vague attention. It was as easy as deceiving the blind.

During the whole of the summer weeks that tragedy lasted,

he never once thought of his daughter at the same time with the young stranger. He called daily for a fortnight over the injured finger. He was clever enough to get to know when the doctor would be from home. He always waited for his return ; so it came to pass that many hours of the beautiful summer days were spent by them in the shady, flowery cottage.

The doctor had no suspicions. Agatha was a child to him ; that she had grown fair and slender as a young palm tree did not occur to him, to whom she would always be a child. Fortune at times seems to favor the designs of evil ; it certainly favored Sir Vane. Any other girl would have foreseen the danger to herself.

She lived on as unconscious of what was coming into her life as a dreaming child. She did not notice how, every day when he left her, he said something which plainly indicated when he should come again ; and she, quite as unconsciously, was always there.

A great love is pitiful, it is so often wasted, so often lavished in vain. This girl's whole soul had gone from her, never to be her own again. Gradually her life became one long dream of him. She remembered every word he uttered, she could bring to her mind every expression of his face ; wherever he stood became a place at once sacred to her ; if he touched a book, a picture, or ornament, it became a priceless treasure to her ; when he threw away a withered flower she treasured it. It was love without stint, without measure, without limit or bounds ; and yet she knew nothing of what it was.

They had met each other one bright June morning in the beautiful old avenue of chestnuts that led to Croft Woods, accidentally on her part, intentionally on his—a beautiful morning, such as one often finds in England in the glory of summer prime. Some of the flowers of the chestnut had fallen, and the leaves lay at their feet.

'How bright the sunshine is to-day !' she said. 'It must be a fancy of mine, but it seems quite a different color.'

His dark, handsome eyes devoured the fair, calm beauty of the angelic face.

'Perhaps the difference comes from within,' he said, 'I have known times when the brightest sun held no light for me.'

'That comes from trouble,' she said, gently.

'Yes, or weariness, or *ennui*; that you see the light brighter proves—do you know what it proves?'

'No, I do not,' she replied: 'will you tell me?'

'It proves that new brightness has come into your life,' he said.

She looked at him with such serious eyes.

'I do not think so,' she said calmly. 'My life is just the same as it has always been.'

His heart sank as he listened. Had all his persistent wooing been wasted—all his devotion been lavished in vain? Would this girl, with the pure soul and angel face, see him pass out of her life forever, and make no sign? He had lavished, as he considered, his best love-making on her, and he had not stirred the sweet, sleeping soul.

'Shall you be content to live here all your life, doing what you are doing now?' he asked, suddenly.

The startled look in her eyes showed him that she had not thought of the future.

'I do not know,' she said. 'I am very happy—I could not be happier.'

'Would you not like to see something of the great world?' he asked. 'Out beyond the green hills which surround Whitecroft there lies a grand world, full of art, science, beauty, and pleasure. This place is like the "Happy Valley" of Rasselas—have you no wish to go beyond it?'

'I have never thought of it,' she said. 'It must seem strange to you, but my life has always been filled. I have so many to help, so much to do, that I have had no time to think of such things. I hardly realized that there was a world beyond the green hills there which I had never seen.'

'Do tell me,' he said, bending forward eagerly—are you mortal?—human? Have you ever known what it is to—to feel your own heart beat one throb more quickly—to feel your pulse thrill—to feel even your own face grow warmer? Are you really a mortal, or are you, as I sometimes half believe, the Agatha from the stained-glass window, come down to earth with nothing but soul and spirit? Which is it?'

She laughed out merrily.

'Indeed I am not St. Agatha. She has iron bars across her face, you know.'

'And you have iron bars across your soul,' he interrupted. For the first time he saw that her beautiful face was crimson, and her eyes fell—the first time there was a breaking of the long sleep, a stir of the tremulous, rosy dawn. 'You are very much like that figure, Miss Brooke,' he said,

And she laughed again, the merriest, happiest laugh he had ever heard.

'I am very glad,' she said. 'I would sooner be like that than a figure in a fashion-book.'

'I should hardly have thought that you had ever seen one,' he said. 'I could not think of you at the same time with fashion and finery; you always come into my mind with the beautiful, picturesque surroundings of the church, or these lanes. I do not believe you know what fashion is, Miss Brooke.'

'I am not quite sure that I do,' she said, slowly.

'There is a beautiful world you ought to know,' he continued, 'that has nothing so frivolous as fashion—the world of art, and science, and beauty. You are too much (I know you will forgive me, Miss Brooke) too much like an angel—nay, that I cannot be sure of—too much like a marble statue—as fair, as pure, as lifeless.'

'How can you say so?' she cried. 'Why, I am full of life!'

'I could say to you what the Queen Guinevere said of her husband—"You want warmth and coloring."'

'That I do not!' she cried, almost indignantly, and taking his words quite literally. 'I am never cold, and I have color enough for—'

She paused for want of a simile.

'For a wild rose,' he suggested.

'Yes, or any other rose,' she said, earnestly.

'You do not understand,' he said. 'You want warmth of manner.'

'I think not,' she said. 'I am often ashamed of myself for the way in which the children caress and love me.'

'Ashamed, are you?' he said. 'Ah, me! I wish I were a child!'

'Do you, Sir Vane—and why?'

The simple wonder of her question was beautiful to the man of the world. He whispered his answer, and in that whisper the dreaming soul awoke, never to sleep or dream again.

## CHAPTER VI.

## CONJECTURES AND SUSPICIONS.

**M**Y dear,' said Lady Croft to her husband, 'pray do not laugh at me, and think that I am always fancying evils, but I am not quite easy over Sir Vane.'

Lord Croft laughed.

'What is wrong, Emily?' he asked.

'I do not know—I cannot guess,' she replied frankly. 'I have nothing but suspicion, and that I ought to be ashamed of; but I cannot believe he is going on all right. He spends so much time out of doors, and I am told he seldom goes out without a bouquet of flowers. Flowers in his hands mean mischief, I am sure.'

'They are very innocent messengers,' said his lordship, who was always amused with his wife's scruples and fears.

Lady Croft continued anxiously:

'Have you heard anything about him? Are there any rumors in the neighborhood, or what is more to the point, are there any pretty girls? You know he will get into mischief.'

'I think you misjudge him, this time, at least,' said Lord Croft. 'There are no nice girls visiting in our neighborhood; at least none that we know of.'

They never thought of the doctor's daughter, the girl whom every one called the angel of the poor; both had heard of her, both had seen her, but in both their minds she was set apart from the rest of the world by the beautiful charity of her life.

'He is staying so much longer than he intended,' continued Lady Croft. 'You know I like him; I think he is one of the handsomest and most courteous of men, but I do not quite trust him. Lady Brandon told me some strange stories about him; I hope they are not true.'

'Stories about people never are true,' said his lordship calmly. 'Do not trouble about it, Emily; I should know if anything was wrong.'

'I should like to know where those flowers go,' said her ladyship, plaintively. Afterwards she knew.

Another conversation took place that same day. The rector, Dr. Ruthven, had gone to his garden, where every day he reviewed his standard roses and carnations; his wife, Lady Anne, followed him.

'Francis,' she said, 'I am not quite happy in my mind this morning.'

She was a good-hearted, generous, kindly woman, with broad views and sympathies—busy, rather fussy and effusive, but genuine to the very core of her heart. Doctor Ruthven was so well accustomed to her little eccentricities, that nothing she said ever surprised or ruffled him.

'Francis,' she repeated, in a louder tone of voice, 'do you hear what I say?'

'I beg pardon, my dear,' said the rector. 'This is the rose that I took such pains to ingraft, and I am afraid it is dying. What is the matter—your mind, did you say?'

'Yes,' replied her ladyship, 'I said my mind. I am not quite easy or happy in my mind, and I want to speak to you about it. I went into Whitecroft yesterday, and passed the end of the great cathedral avenue, I saw—what do you think I saw, Francis?'

'Only Heaven knows, my love,' said the rector, piously and patiently.

'A sight,' she continued, 'that made me very anxious; Agatha Brooke, looking fair and angelic, as she always does, in earnest conversation with Sir Vane Carlyon.'

'And who, my dear, is Sir Vane Carlyon?' asked the rector, for his wife had paused, as though anxious not quite to overwhelm him.

'Oh, Francis,' cried Lady Anne, 'when will you give more attention to such matters? You must remember having met Sir Vane two or three times lately at Croft Abbey.'

'What!' cried the rector, 'that handsome young fellow with the dark eyes; of course I remember him. I was much struck with him. That reminds me that he has called here three times, and we have been from home. We must ask the whole Abbey party to dinner. But why was he with Agatha Brooke?'

'That is what I want to find out,' said Lady Croft. 'Agatha, to my mind, is the sweetest and the most beautiful girl I ever knew, and the best. She is as simple and innocent as the daisies that grow in the field; she has no mother, and her father, good man as he is, never comes out of the clouds. I feel that I am in some way responsible for the beautiful motherless girl. Francis, I am quite sure, from the way in which he looked at her, that he was making love to her.'

'Making love to her!' repeated the rector. 'My dear Anne, it is impossible.'

'My dear Francis, it is true,' she replied. 'Now what does it mean? He cannot think of marrying her, and if he is only seeking a little flirtation and a little amusement, it must not be allowed; her life must not be shadowed by a light love like that. Agatha Brooke is different from most girls; there is more of the angel than anything else about her. Do you think I had better speak to her?'

'I should do it very cautiously, Anne. There may be nothing at all in it, and you may suggest ideas that would otherwise never have occurred to her.'

'I will be careful enough,' said her ladyship, 'but I shall certainly do it. 'What a sad thing it is when a girl loses her mother!'

Another little event happened that same day. Sir Vane could not tear himself away. He walked home as far as the cottage gate, where he stood so long, and looked so loving at the exquisite drooping face, that Joan Mayberry, the doctor's faithful old servant, grew impatient. What was this handsome man—looking, as she thought, like a young prince—talking to her young mistress about? Surely this was the same man who had called so often, and Joan's eyes were suddenly opened.

'What have we all been thinking about?' she said to herself. 'Great heavens! what is master doing?' For Joan, who in early life had been disappointed by a faithless butcher, believed that all men were like ravenous wolves, and that one should come near this household treasure was not to be thought of.

'The mischief is done,' thought Joan to herself, with a deep groan, as she watched Agatha enter the house, the lovely face blushing with the sweet shame of her love, the eyes down-dropped, the red lips parted in a tender, dreamy smile.'

'That is just how I looked when John left me,' she said to herself. 'She does not know where she is going, that is quite sure, she who has never had another thought except for the church and the poor. I must tell her she has no mother of her own.'

Yet, when an hour afterward she went into the pretty sitting-room under the pretence of talking about the gathering of fruit, she was quite at a loss how to begin. The girl before her, with her fair, pure face and sweet, happy eyes, looked so unconscious of anything like flirtation, the old servant was at a loss. It was like warning an angel against earth.

'What is it, Joan?' asked Agatha, finding that the old servant stood still with an expression of great uncertainty on her face. 'What is it?'

'I want to ask you, honey, who was it talking to you at the gate?'

'This morning, do you mean?' asked Agatha.

'Yes, this morning, and he stood there so long he might have been a gate-post himself,' replied Joan.

But she was relieved even before the answer came; the face into which she gazed so anxiously never changed—there was neither flush nor smile, as Agatha answered:

'That gentleman is one of my father's patients—he is Sir Vane Carlyon, the only nobleman on our books, Joan.'

'A nobleman, is he, honey? Ah, take care, take care. Men are bad enough—but noblemen——' and the upraised hands spoke eloquently of Joan's opinion of noblemen.

'Bad! How do you mean, Joan?' asked her young mistress, who knew the episode of the faithless butcher.

'Deceitful, I mean, Miss Agatha; and what I should like to know is this—if a butcher can be so deceitful, what might a nobleman be?'

'But, Joan, do you think a man's crimes, or sins, or follies rise with his position in life?' asked Agatha.

'You may be sure they do, honey,' replied Joan, not quite sure of her position, and looking very wise to make up for it.

'According to that,' she said, 'a king would be the most wicked of men, and a beggar the most holy.'

There is something in that, dear,' said Joan. 'But you take care, Miss Agatha,' do not believe a word he says—and ask him what he means—and do not let him speak to you.'



After which contradictory directions, Joan looked very triumphant but decidedly vague.

'What must I take care of, Joan?' asked Agatha, gently.

'Why must I never believe Sir Vane?'

Joan replied with a mournful gesture.

'I always look upon men as wolves, Miss Agatha, seeking the lambs; ah, you may laugh, honey, but it is true—you are a lamb—and a precious one, too; take care how they seek you.'

'No one seeks me, Joan,' she replied, laughing merrily at the idea.

She did not know that she loved this young man with all her heart, and that he had been seeking her all these weeks past.

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## CHAPTER VII.

### WARNING VOICES.

**A**GATHA Brooks stood by the open window in the pretty sitting-room reading a note. It puzzled her greatly—

Lady Anne Ruthven wanted to speak to her, and would be glad to see her that day, if she could. Agatha decided upon going at once; the vicarage was not far distant from the doctor's pretty home. In a short time she found herself with Lady Anne, who received her with her usual kindness and fuss.

'My dear,' she said. 'I sent for you because I want to speak to you on a very important little matter. Will you come into the garden with me? I do not wish any one to know what I am saying, and one can never be quite sure in four walls, for walls have ears.'

Wondering from what this great desire of secrecy arose, Agatha followed Lady Anne, and walked with her down a broad path that was shaded by fruit trees and bordered with sweet old-fashioned flowers.

'You have no mother, my dear,' began her ladyship; 'therefore I have sent for you to talk to you myself. Now,

tell me quite frankly who was that gentleman talking to you in the lane the other morning, and what was he talking about ?

‘He is Sir Vane Carlyon, one of my father’s patients, and we were talking about the world in general,’ she replied.

An expression of great relief came over Lady Anne’s face.

‘That is it,’ she said. ‘I could not imagine how you came to know him so well.’

But Agatha was too truthful to let an evasion pass. She told Lady Anne all about the church door and the music ; and the rector’s wife, who knew something of the world, declared to herself that he had purposely injured his finger—there could not be the least doubt of it.

He was most certainly seeking the girl, although she was entirely unconscious of it. Lady Anne felt that she must interfere, she must speak out. Yet, like Joan, she was awed by the girl’s pure, sweet face and child-like innocence.

‘My dear,’ she said, slowly, ‘it is a sad pity that your mother is not living just now.’

‘Why just now more than any other time ?’ asked Agatha.

‘Because you need her more. But I will say for her what I believe she would have said—you must be careful ; you should not talk to gentlemen ; above all, to one who is a perfect stranger.’

‘He has been very kind to me,’ said Agatha, ‘and he has taught me a good deal that I did not know.’

Lady Anne looked up quickly ; there was nothing but bright, fair innocence in that exquisite face.

‘A handsome young man is not the best teacher you can have, Agatha. What has he taught you ?’

‘A great deal, Lady Anne. I knew so little.’

‘You knew enough, my dear, to make your life of use to others and get to Heaven.’

‘I know more of heaven now,’ she answered, with unconscious warmth.

‘An earthly heaven, I fear,’ said the elder lady ; but the girl by her side did not even know what an earthly heaven was. She saw that Agatha had not the faintest suspicion of what she meant. She went on, gravely :

'It is always unpleasant to open the eyes of an innocent girl to the evil ways of the world, but I must warn you, Agatha. This young man is evidently one of a class you have never met, with lax notions, in all probability, of right and wrong, and caring only about pleasing himself. Let me tell you how such young men do enjoy themselves. They come to a quiet out-of-the-way spot, like this, and finding no other mischief ready to hand, they amuse themselves by flirting with the nicest girl they can find, and then leave her to break her heart. They think no more of such things than a mower does of cutting the grass. The girl may be warned, but she never listens to the warning. She may be cautioned, but she always thinks herself wiser than others. She gives away her heart and her love; they amuse the young man very much for a few weeks then he goes away and forgets her name. I have known many instances of it—forgets even her name.'

The beautiful face has grown pale, and there is a shadow of fear in her violet eyes; yet she speaks out bravely what she thinks.

'Oh, Lady Anne, she cried, 'I do not think men are so cruel. I have known many, but I have never heard of such a case.'

Lady Anne turned to look at her—the innocence of eighteen against the experience of forty.

'My dear,' she said, 'which of us two has lived the longest—which knows the most? You have never left Whitecroft. I have been through the London seasons I have seen—ah, well, I will not tell you what I have seen, but what I tell you is true. A man like Sir Vane—rich, eagerly sought after—amuses himself often and often by pretending to love, and a few months afterward has forgotten even the name of the girl who, it may be, never looks up again after his departure. Dear Agatha, I have seen such wrecked, blighted lives! Be careful—believe me; for your own sake, for Heaven's sake be careful!'

'I will, indeed,' said Agatha, 'if you will tell me what about.'

'If he talks nonsense to you, do not believe him,' said Lady Anne.

'He does not talk nonsense,' replied Agatha, 'If you heard him, you would enjoy all he says, it is so fresh—eloquent.'

'That I do not doubt,' said her ladyship, dryly, 'but you must not believe it. Does he flatter you—tell you you are beautiful?'

'No,' she replied: then remembering how fervently he had wished to be a child, she stopped, blushing crimson.

'Does he ever talk about love?' continued Lady Anne, feeling that she could not go any further.

'No,' was the brief reply.

'I am glad to hear it. There is only one honorable love in the world, and it ends always in marriage. Such a man as this Sir Vane would never have that love for you, Agatha; such men marry women from their own world—from their own sphere of life.'

'Lady Anne,' cried the girl, 'why do you say these things to me?' I do not deserve them. I have no thought of marriage. I shall never leave my father. You—you pain and grieve me!'

'I did not intend to do so,' said Lady Anne. 'All you have to do is to pass him with a bow, and if he should speak to you in the streets, lanes, or fields, tell him that Lady Anne Ruthven does not approve of it. Will you do that?'

'Yes,' she replied, and Lady Anne could say no more. Her warning, after all, had been a poor one—she had taken but one view of a wide subject. Agatha was not to believe, not to trust: but she spoke no word to the girl of the passionate love which carries all before it. When she had finished, had kissed Agatha and dismissed her, Lady Anne felt very much as though she had taken the veil from the eyes of a child.

'After all,' she said to herself, 'I am not quite sure whether I have done more harm than good; the child knows nothing and cares less about love. I may have put ideas into her mind which were not there before.'

Agatha walked home in a state of bewilderment, for old Joan and Lady Anne had said very nearly the same things, and the spirit of what they had said was the same.

For one whole day Agatha did not see Sir Vane. The next, her father told her during breakfast that one of her favorite children was ill and asking to see her—little John Byrne, who lived on the other side of Whitecroft. It was a beautiful morning—he would drive her there if she liked, or she could cross the bridge and walk through Croft Woods.

Some impulse made her choose the wood. She loved the green shade, the golden gleams of light, the soft grass, the hundreds of wild flowers, the songs of the happy birds—she loved them all. She would not think whether she would see something even more beautiful than wood and river in her eyes.

He was there in the green lane, the key of the whole position; in whatever direction she went he could see her, and he followed her to Croft Wood. The moment his eyes met hers he knew that something had happened. She had always met him with a frank, innocent smile of a child—it was a woman's blush that burned her face now and made her eyes droop. He saw the change, and he understood it.

'How glad I am to see you!' he said. 'Yesterday seemed a century long; you did not leave home, did you?'

'No,' she replied. 'I was busy all day long; but I am glad that I have met you—I have something to say to you.' and the words were so unlike her that Sir Vane stood rooted to the spot with wonder.

'You have something to say to me, Miss Brooke; that is a very happy novelty. Will you tell me what it is!'

'Yes. I am sorry to—to tell it, but Lady Anne Ruthven desired—nay, I may say she commanded me to do so.'

He had a presentiment of what was coming, for he drew nearer to her and listened eagerly.

'Lady Anne said that I was to tell you she did not approve of my talking or walking with you.'

'What has Lady Anne to do with it?' he cried.

'She looks after every one in Whitecroft,' she said, simply. 'and she talked to me because I have no mother.'

He knew then what had passed as well as though he had been present.

'Old woman's gossip,' he thought, as he ground his teeth; 'but all the old women in the world shall not take her from me.'

'The strange thing is,' she continued 'that Joan talked to me about it—Joan is my old nurse.'

'What had she to say?' he cried, almost savagely.

'She says that men are wolves. What a horrible idea, is it not? They both seem to imply worse than they said. I am quite sure that Lady Anne would like talking to you.'

'And you—yourself—what do you say, Miss Brooke?'

A great blush came over the sweet face, and a light of triumph came into his eyes.

'Let us even if it be for the last time, go through the woods together. I, too, have something to say to you.'

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE CONFESSION.

HERE was a beautiful little nook in the wood which might have been made for the fairies—a cluster of fine beech trees grew close together—grand old trees, whose branches swept the ground, whose leaves rippled in the wind, in whose boughs the birds had built their nests, the space between them was carpeted by thick soft grass—in which king cups and wild celandines grew; all kinds of wild flowers clustered round the roots of the trees, scarlet creepers twisted themselves through the grass—a piece from fairy land; and here Sir Vane found a place for Agatha, throwing himself at her feet.

'I have something to say to you, Agatha,' he said: 'do you hear what the happy birds are singing to each other—three little words over and over again—they never tire of them? Do you know what that purple winged butterfly is saying there to the wild roses? Do you know what the flowers say to the wind that woos the sun, that warms the dew that freshens them—do you know, Agatha? Three little words, can you guess them?'

'Not quite,' she answered shyly.

And because her eyes could not meet his, and because the new life that thrilled in her heart made her tremble, she gathered the golden blossoms of the celandine. In the after years she never looked at them or touched them without a sting of bitter pain. She sat quite silent, with the golden blossoms in her hand; a great calm came over her. It was like standing at the threshold of another world.

'The sweetest words in the world,' he continued. 'Just these—"I love you." And what the birds say to each other I say to you my darling—I love you.'

He had often longed to break the calm of that exquisite face, and to see the fire of love in the eyes that held the light of heaven.

'I love you,' he repeated, taking her hand in his. 'Do you know what that means?'

The calm was broken now; rich crimson blushes covered the fair face, her lips quivered, her eyes grew dim with happy tears.

'Yes I know,' she replied.

'I love you, Agatha! I loved you the first moment I saw you standing in the old gray church—do you remember it, darling, the sunlight was on your brow, and lay athwart the little white hands that could not lock the door. I stood and watched you; a lark was singing over your head, and your shadow fell on the grass. My heart went out to you in that moment, and it has never come back to me—it never will—it lies there now. What shall you do with it—this heart of mine?'

'You loved me,' she whispered, 'and you had never spoken to me.'

'I loved you even before that, Agatha. I saw you first of all in the church, you were kneeling under the eastern window, and you were so silent, so motionless, that at first I half fancied the figure with the palm branch in her hand had come down to kneel and pray. I loved you then. It was a new revelation to me, a new life. Seeing you here changed all the world for me. It is for love of you that I have been lingering here, it is for love of you that I mean to stay here until you promise to go away with me.'

He did not understand the sudden light that broke over her face and died in a smile on her lips. She was saying to herself that Lady Anne and Joan had both been mistaken, had both misjudged him. The fact was they had warned her wisely enough against the love that 'lightly rides away,' but neither of them had spoken to her of the love that would carry her away with it; they had warned her against the man who would win her love and forget it, they had not warned

her against the man who wanted her love in return, and would not go without it. They were both wrong and a sense of unutterable gladness filled the pure young heart.

'You are so silent, Agatha,' he pleaded, 'say one word to me. I tell you I love you—I lay my heart at your feet! Will you try to love me?'

She twisted her fingers nervously from his, and gathered the golden celandines once more. He took them from her, and gathered her hands in a passionate clasp.

'You must listen, sweet, to me; and you must not look at the pretty celandines—I am jealous of them. I brought you here to tell you how dearly I love you—to ask you if you love me. What answer will you give me, sweet? In all these weeks, when I have been like a shadow to you, have you not learned to care for me?'

No answer came from the girl's sweet lips, but the drooping face was enough for him; he knew that he had won his victory.

'You have never loved any one in your life, have you, sweet?' he asked.

'No, never—that is, except my father and all the poor in Whitecroft.'

He smiled.

'But you have never had a lover, Agatha?'

'Oh no!' she cried in genuine distress; 'I have not thought of such a thing.'

'Do you know, Agatha, that before a woman learns to love, her heart sleeps, sleeps in a delicious calm, knows little pleasure, little pain, little rapture, little despair. It dreams. But when love comes, it wakes—wakes to a new life, full of sharpest pleasure and pain—full of sweetness that is yet half bitter—of bitterness wholly sweet. And the dawn of love is like the beautiful rosy flush, that breaks in trembling on the still gray of the morning skies. Has your soul awoken yet? It was sleeping when I saw you first—sleeping in deepest calm. Has it awoken? Lift up your face, my darling, and let me see.'

But the beautiful face drooped even lower; she dare not raise it lest he should read her secret in her eyes.

'I must see it for myself,' he continued: 'I cannot say more until I know whether you are willing to listen.'

He raised her face in his hands, and looked into her eyes.



Alas! it was the face of a child no more; all the passion, the tenderness of woman's love was there, showing itself in crimson blushes, in the drooping eyes, the trembling lips. Ah! too surely the calm was broken, never to be calm again. She tried in vain to hide the flushed face—he would read it, and she was powerless.

'I see,' he said slowly, 'your heart is awake, Agatha. It is the rosy dawn not the gray light. You have been a marble statue long enough. Why, your very face is changed.'

It was no longer the pale pure face, so like that of Agatha with the palm branch. Blushing, sweet, half confused, a new light shone there, and the old life of peace and calm was gone forever more.

'Do you care for me a little?' he said earnestly. He had begun his wooing from fancy or caprice, he had grown so earnest over it, that it was as though his life depended on the answer. 'A little, Agatha?' I must have made some difference to your life—tell me.

'I—I cannot,' she said, gently. 'I do not know—I do not understand.'

'Let me teach you. Do you think of me when I am away from you? Can you recall my words and looks?'

'Yes,' she replied; your face and voice are never out of my mind.'

'When you see anything beautiful, when you hear sweet music, when you watch the skies and the sunset, do your thoughts go to me?'

'They never leave you,' she said.

'Do you dream of me at night, and wish for me all day?'

The fair head drooped lower, but he knew the answer was: 'Yes.'

'When my hand clasps yours, does your heart beat faster for it? If I were to kiss your dear face, would you tremble with happiness as I do now?'

He gathered her in his strong arms, and kissed the sweet lips that had never been kissed save by the women and children who loved her—kissed her with passion so wild and vehement she was awed and frightened.

'My darling,' he said, 'if you knew how I had longed for this hour. I never dreamed it was so sweet to wake a

woman's sleeping heart, and yet when I saw your face, I thought how human love would brighten and beautify it. Will you tell me now—do you care for me?'

It seemed to the trembling girl that her very life had gone out to him—that her heart and soul had left her to go to him, and she could not recover them. She was dazed with her great happiness; the blue sky, the tall trees, the green grass, the golden ceratines, all seemed to whirl in one confused mass; the song of the birds, the hum of the bees, the rich, deep sound of her lover's voice filled her ears; it was as though a dazzling ray of sunlight had fallen at her feet and blinded her. If she had been more like other girls, if she had had 'small flirtations and little loves,' it would not have affected her, but to the pure, sensitive heart and innocent soul, over which breath of evil never passed, this great human love came, with a depth and earnestness lighter natures could never know, came like a revelation.

'You will tell me, Agatha?' he said. 'I must hear it from your own lips—in your own fashion.'

He laid her arms round his neck.

'If you are afraid of the sound of your own voice,' he said, 'whisper to me. You are speaking to your own heart, when you speak to mine.'

She did whisper, and he thought them the sweetest words he had ever heard.

'I do love you,' she said. 'I care for you more than for my own life. I—I love you,' and then she was silent with unutterable content.

'My darling, it is more than I deserve that you should say this to me; but they are words I would have died to hear. I would have given my whole life for one kiss from you; and he loved her so deeply and so earnestly in that one moment, that he positively half thought that he would leave Croft Abbey and never see her again; but the beautiful face charmed him, bound him captive and the half-formed wish died.

'You have loved your father and the poor; every sick or sorrowing soul in the parish seems to have found comfort in you. You have loved inanimate things, such as the old gray church, the organ, the eastern window, the grand steeple,

the meadows and these bonnie woods ; but until now, you have never given your heart to a human love ?'

'Never,' she said.

'Now you must give it wholly, Agatha ; there is nothing in life so sweet. You must give me all your thoughts, your love, your interest, your heart. I am to be your world, your life—everything. Promise me.'

With happy eyes and smiling lips she promised him.

'You belong to me now,' he said ; you must think my thoughts, love my loves, dislike what I dislike, believe what I believe. Will you, Agatha ?'

Of course she would ; she was only too pleased to promise. What could be better if they were only to have one heart, one soul, one life between them ? It would be ten thousand times better that they should have but one set of ideas.

'I want you, my darling,' he said, 'not to think of the past or the future, but to live only in the present, and to keep all your heart concentrated on this one fact—that I love you and you love me—will you ?'

'Yes,' she answered.

He drew her to his heart, and covered her face with kisses.

'Are you happy ?' he asked.

'I am as happy as the angels in Heaven,' she answered, and the words smote even that wordy heart with keenest pain.

## CHAPTER IX.

### LIFE WITHOUT HONOR WORTHLESS.

FOR the next few days Agatha was seen no more in the cottages ; the children looked in vain for their beautiful, gentle friend, the women for their benefactress. As she had given up her whole heart and soul before now to fair and gracious deeds, she now gave it up with the simplest and most earnest worship to love.

Sir Vane came no more to the cottage half-hidden by flowers—he knew that there was a guardian angel there in the shape of old Joan. As he had grown more interested in his wooing, he had grown more careful over it; he never met her now where the keen eyes of Lady Anne could discover him; he had assumed a mastery over Agatha which was delightful to the girl who loved him with her whole heart; her whole days were one long act of obedience to him.

‘You will walk through Croft Wood to-morrow, Agatha,’ he would say; ‘and you will find some one there who would wait a whole day, even in the sharpest frost, just to see you pass by;’ or ‘the moon will be shining, my darling, to-night. Come into the lane that I may see the moonlight in your eyes.’

He managed every day to see her once or twice; and his wooing was so sweet that, only for his long stay at Croft Abbey he would have prolonged it.

He was watching the awakening of the truest, purest heart that had ever beat, the tremulous blushes, the sweet, coy smiles, the thousand new and beautiful graces that love had awakened in her.

It is not pleasant to write of human cruelty; one does not linger over the details of the torture of a bird, or the slaying of a butterfly. She was so young, so spiritual, so innocent, he might spare her. So long as he lived he would meet no one like her. He had the greatest influence over her; he could persuade her to believe anything that he told her; and he set himself deliberately to work to destroy the whole fabric of her life.

Everything in this world had made progress, he told her; but nothing, perhaps, greater than what was called religious belief. He tried to explain to her how so-called clever men of the present day had found out that there was no need for faith—for self restraint. He had pointed to the old gray church, which made his words a living lie; and said:

‘All the kind of thing taught there is old-fashioned nonsense; good enough, you know, for the simple people here, but the world has shot ahead; this is not the age of narrow ideas. One by one, as if by some cruel siege a fair castle is destroyed, he beat down the ramparts of faith, with specious word, with clever argument; not that she ever loved Heaven less, but that she began to have a confused idea things were not as

she had believed them to be—that there were many other views of life than hers.

They lingered one evening in the shade of Croft Wood—a warm, beautiful summer evening, when the very wind seemed to whisper of love, the flowers all languid and fragrant with the heat of the sun, the birds singing the sweetest good-night to each other. Now was the time to ask her the question which should decide his fate and hers.

Poets say that when a man's soul is most desperately tempted legions of good spirits rush to its aid. No soul ever needed help more than hers, for the crisis in her life had come.

'Agatha, my darling,' said Sir Vane, 'I have something to tell you. I have had letters this morning about business.'

She was sitting on a grassy mound, and he was half kneeling at her feet. She looked at him with a smile—that world of business was far from her; her whole soul just then was steeped in poetry and romance. His face was somewhat agitated and pale.

'I am very much afraid,' he said, 'that I must go to Garswood—that is my home, you know; there are several business matters that require my presence, and I fear I must go.'

'Go!' she repeated slowly—'go! I had never thought of that.'

He had watched the beautiful color fade from her face, leaving her white even to the lips.

'I had thought of it,' he continued. 'I knew that a life so beautiful, a dream so bright as this dream of ours, could not last.'

'Cannot last!' she repeated; and he watched with keen, cruel eyes how the light faded from her eyes, and her white lips seemed to grow mute and stiff. 'You will come back again,' she said in a low voice, 'will you not?'

'I do not think so,' he replied. 'You see, darling, I came originally for a few days to Croft Abbey, and I have been here many weeks. I cannot return, at least this year. I could not come to stay at Whitecroft: it would be offensive to Lord Croft.'

'But,' she faltered, 'do you mean that I shall not see you for a whole year?'

'I am afraid, my darling, that I cannot promise even as to a year. Perhaps Lord Croft may not ask me down again.'

Man of the world as he was, and utterly callous where only the heart of a woman was concerned, he turned away from her, for he could not endure to see the anguish in her eyes. The white fixed face, with the strained, wistful look in the large violet eyes hurt even him with a physical pain.

'Could you not come,' she asked, in a low voice, 'without any one asking you? You can do as you like always.'

'It would involve more than you think of at present,' he replied. 'But we will not think or speak of parting on this fair summer's eve; it would spoil all its beauty.'

She looked up at him with eyes full of reproachful wonder.

'Is it not spoiled now?' she asked. 'Ah, me! while I live the sun will never shine for me again!'

'Do you care so much for me?' he asked.

'You know,' she replied, and her face lay hidden on his breast.

'I do not know; I want to hear it from yourself,' he said — 'from your own lips. Do you care for me so much?'

'More than for my own life' she replied.

'Would you give up the world, and all you love best in it, for me?' he asked.

'Yes,' she answered; 'I would.'

'Without counting the cost?' he asked.

'There would be no cost. In following my love I should follow the highest good,' she replied. Then her tender arms were laid round his neck, and she said: 'You make me think of my beautiful namesake, Agatha, in the old church. They asked whether she would have all this world could give her—honor, wealth, pleasure, love—and deny God, or whether she would die praising Him.'

'What would you have done,' he asked her, 'if you had been tried in the same fashion?'

She was quite silent for a few minutes, then she raised her fair young face to the blue skies.

'I would have died as Agatha did,' she replied. 'Life without honor is not worth living.'

The words were like a blow in the face to him. Was it worth his while to try to win a girl who held honor dearer than life? He had but one hold on her, one weapon with

which he could struggle, and that was her great love for himself.

'I believe you,' he replied, reverently.

He drew her closer to him.

'Now tell me,' he said, 'if you had to choose between death and giving me up, never to see me or hear me speak again, which would you choose.'

She clung to him weeping as surely woman had never wept before.

'Death,' she said; 'death a thousand times over. I could die for you; I could never live without you.'

When he kissed her and bade her good-night, he said:

'Will you come here at the same time to-morrow, and then I will tell you what I think about going away?'

She promised, while her eyes were wet with tears.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE CRISIS OF HER LIFE.

SIR VANE could not have done a wiser thing for himself than allowed Agatha to leave him with that sword of bitter pain in her heart. What should she do? What was to become of her?

She passed a long, sleepless night, and arose from her couch unrefreshed and pale. The tedious hours dragged slowly on, and the end of the bright afternoon brought her to Croft Wood again. It required no practical eye to see that the young face is worn with pain—that all the brightness and radiance have left her; that the great purple shadows under her eyes come from the shedding of many tears. It was painful to see the quivering of her lips as she tried to speak to him in her usual fashion. It was as though a bright and beautiful flower had been smitten with biting frost.

He took her hand in his without a word. Poor child! she looked wistfully in his face.

'Is it the last time, Vane?' she asked, simply.

'That will depend on you, my darling?' he replied.

He was more gentle, more caressing than ever; his eyes never wearied of drinking in the loveliness of that fair, sad face. He said more loving words to her that night than he had ever done before; this was the crisis; he should either win her or lose her that night; he was not sparing of kisses or words: he made her rest where the golden celandines bloomed and the meadow-sweet trembled in the caress of the summer wind.

'You look so tired, Agatha,' he said; what have you been doing? Sitting up again with some of those dreadful children? You must not do such things.'

He knew well enough why the sweet and beautiful face was so pale, but he wanted to make her say so herself. The assurance would be doubly sweet if it came from her own lips. He was kneeling by her side, drawing the pale face to him, and kissing the quivering lips.

'Your life is too precious, too sweet, my darling, to be wasted on these little rustics. You must take more care.'

What would it matter when he was gone? Who would care? Who had ever been like him—cared for her health and comfort? What should she do?

'It is not that, Vane,' she said. 'I have not been sitting up with any one. I have been thinking of you until my heart has almost broken.'

'Of me?' he repeated. 'I ought to be proud and happy.'

'Are you really going away,' she said. 'And so soon!'

'Do you want me to stay?' he whispered.

'Yes, with all my heart,' she replied.

His heart beat with triumph.

'But, Agatha, sweet, if it be impossible?'

'Ah, then may Heaven take pity on me, and let me die!' she cried.

'There is another alternative,' he said, slowly. 'I cannot stay with you. You can go with me; then we shall have no more parting, no more sorrow, no more tears. Come with me, Agatha!'

She flung herself on his breast in a very rapture of joy.



'How good you are! how kind you are! I never wish to leave you. When you are away from me the light of my life is gone.'

He gathered her to his breast and held her there. He kissed the white eyelids and tremulous mouth until the color came into her face again.

'Come with me,' he said. 'I, too—I could not live without you. If I had gone away alone, I should have left the best part of my heart and life behind me. We need never part, if you will trust me. Trust is a hard thing, but give me yours, and death alone will have power to part us.'

Ah Joan and Lady Ruthven were wrong, and she right after all. He was not one to love and run away.

They had never warned her against such wooing as this. They had said he would leave her, but they had not taught her to say 'no' if he asked her to go with him. She was unprepared for this view of the matter, and it seemed to her that the very Heavens were opened when he clasped her in his arms and said :

'Trust me, Agatha, and in this world we need never part again.'

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE TEST OF FAITH.

'HALF the evil in the world,' said Sir Vane, 'comes because the people will not, and do not, trust each other.'

'I trust you,' she said. 'Why should I not? I will not believe one word of what they said, warning me that you would love me and leave me.'

'You see for yourself that they are wrong,' he said. 'Yes, they are wrong. You do not want to leave me. You want me to be with you always.'

He wondered in his heart if they had warned her against that; but after a time he decided that, whatever Lady Anne

and Joan might have said, they had never contemplated her going away with him.

She shivered in the strong grasp that held her. He laid her head on his breast. No music was ever so sweet as his voice while he wooed her on to the broad path which had so fatal an ending.

'You would be so unhappy, my darling, without me,' he said, gently. 'I can picture you, in the long years to come, looking at the places where we have met, true to me always, and loving no other.'

'No, I shall love no other,' she replied; 'and, Vane, I am sure that I should not live long. All last night I was awake thinking what I should do when you were gone. I could not eat or drink—all food was like dry ashes to me. I should soon die. I did not know love was anything like this; it is deeper than life; it is a storm, a whirlwind, and sweeps everything before it. I did not know.'

'We will have no storm, my darling,' whispered Sir Vane; 'we will have a profound and beautiful calm. Why should you be miserable when you may be happy with me? Why die, when our lives can be passed together? Only trust me and all will be well.'

'I do trust you,' she repeated, 'just as I believe in Heaven.'

Heaven, she thought, could be no dearer to her than this handsome lover, whose dark eyes seemed to look through her soul. She believed in him as she had always believed in Heaven.

'We will not part,' said Sir Vane. 'You shall come with me, my darling, and I will show you everything most bright and beautiful under the sun. You shall see the fairest lands, the grandest works; we will go to sunny Italy and fair, sunburnt Spain; we can linger where we will and go where we like. There is nothing this world calls famous or lovely that shall not gladden your eyes.'

She clung to him, weeping from excess of happiness.

'I want nothing but to be with you,' she said.

'You are so beautiful, Agatha, he continued. 'In all the world I have not seen so fair a face, and your beauty shall be adorned with dress and jewels, until men's eyes shall be dazzled as they look at you.'

'No,' she cried, 'that would not please me. I only want to be with you.'

'You have lived in this little village, and know no other life than that dreary round of duties. You shall live where the sound of music and laughter never stops; where the sun shines ever, and fairest flowers bloom; where the days pass all too quickly, and the nights are fair as the days. You shall never wonder on this present life that you could ever endure it. Earth shall be like paradise to you, if you will but trust me.'

'You are too good to me,' she said. 'I can never thank Heaven enough for sending you to me. I see now that my life lacked something; but you—you fill it. If I had died without knowing you, my life would have been incomplete.'

'So would mine have been—so it is without you,' he replied. 'And now, Agatha, you say you trust me?'

'Yes,' she replied, earnestly; 'I could not trust you more. I lay my heart and life in your hands.'

As she spoke she laid her white hands in his, and the face she raised to his was full of light and faith—full of the loving confidence that one sees in the face of a child.

'You give yourself to me?' he said.

'Yes,' she replied.

'To be mine always and forever, never to doubt or leave me; to be mine through life unto death. These are solemn words, Agatha; they bind you to me for all time. Think before you utter them.'

'I need not think, Vane,' she replied. 'I mean them with all my heart.'

'Place your hand in mine, Agatha, and plight your troth to me.'

Simply, as he told her, she laid her hand in his, half-kneeling as she did so. It was the most solemn moment of her life, poor child!

'You promise to love me, and me alone, always—to trust me implicitly in all things—to believe that I know best, and do what I wish you to do?'

'I promise most faithfully,' she said.

'You will be true to me until death—never love me less, or desert me for another?'

'Never,' she replied. 'How could I?'

'My heart is one with yours—my soul, my life are all one with yours,' he said. 'And now, Agatha, do you know what you are at this moment?'

'No,' she answered, with a smile.

'It makes you my wife, dear. Now as we are kneeling together under the blue heavens, as Heaven hears us, you are my wife, darling, and we can never be parted again.'

The beautiful face leaning on his breast grew deadly pale.

Ah! if mother in Heaven, or father on earth had but seen her danger then, and could have snatched her away. To her excited fancy the birds ceased singing to listen, and the leaves stood still on the trees.

If a dart of lightning had been hurled at him from the skies—who could wonder? Some men take lives and are punished by Heaven; he was deliberately and wilfully slaying a human soul—taking from it the life nothing could give it again.

'My wife,' he said. 'Listen, Agatha; how sweet the words are—my beloved wife.'

She did listen, poor child, and she thought to herself that no music on earth was ever so sweet. Then she raised her head and looked at him.

'But, Vane,' she said gently, 'how can that be?—To be a wife one must be married, and wear a wedding-ring. I have not been married—I have no ring.'

'You shall have one, my darling—a wedding-ring, thick and solid as gold can make it. Tell me what marriage is?'

She looked puzzled for a few minutes, then her brows and eyes cleared, like those of a child who suddenly remembers a lesson.

'Marriage,' she repeated, 'It is when two hearts and two souls become one.'

'Right; and were two hearts ever more surely one than ours?' he asked.

'No; I should think not,' she replied.

'Now follow my reason, Agatha. Marriage means the union of two hearts in love and faith. Our hearts are one; therefore, I say we are married.'

His heart smote him for one moment, when she looked at him with the eyes of a child, and the smile of an angel.

'How strange!' she said, musingly; 'but, Vane, marriage is a ceremony with all kinds of blessings and prayers attached to it. I know, for I have several times been to the weddings in the village. People cannot marry each other; it is the minister who marries them.'

'My darling, that is the fuss and ceremony that the world has chosen to surround it with; believe in this, the far more simple doctrine of love. What need of all those announcements and ceremonies? I love you with all my heart. I have given you my heart; I have pledged my faith; I have plighted my troth to you; you have done the same to me. What marriage can be more true, more solemn than ours?'

She knew so little how to controvert it, or what to say, that she was silent. The idea was quite new to her, and, with the glamour of love blinding every sense, it was so easy to deceive her. He went on:

'I admit that this law could not be general; there are men so weak, and women so frail, that they require vows, oaths, and penalties to keep them right; but to high-minded, honourable people, what need? If I were a woman, I would sooner put my hand in my love's hand, and wander with him, if needs must be, to the other end of the earth, trusting always to his honor, than feeling that he was bound to me by chains that are sometimes of iron. Do you not see, my darling?'

'I see,' she said, faintly. 'I cannot explain; but it does not seem to be right. According to that, you could marry as you liked, it seems to me.'

'It is a belief intended only for those who love truly, Agatha,' he said, loftily; 'of course, my darling, if you cannot trust me—'

'I do trust you,' she said; 'but, Vane, let it be after the old fashion, not this new one.'

Poor child, she did not know that what she called the new fashion was as old as sin itself.

'You do not know how beautiful the words of the marriage service are.'

'We will kneel down here and say them together, Agatha.'

It never occurred to her for one moment that he was luring her to her ruin. She never at that time doubted the truth of what he was saying.

'I should like best,' she continued slowly, 'to be married in a church, and to hear all those grand blessings. I should like the ring to be placed on my finger, just as I saw it on Anne Gay's not many weeks ago.'

'I will place it there myself,' he said.

'Is it quite the same thing?' she asked, doubtfully.

'Quite,' he answered; 'that is, if you have trust and faith in the one who placed it there. You have that faith in me.'

'Tell me, Vane,' she said, gently, 'why do you like this plan best? Why not go to the church, as everyone else does?'

'Pardon me—everyone else does not; but this is the reason. I will tell it to you. If we went through all the fuss and ceremony that is usual, of course the marriage would be talked about, that would not do. There are grave reasons why my marriage with you must not be known—grave and weighty reasons. I will explain them to you later on. It would be my ruin if it were known.'

'That must not be,' she said, gently.

'No, I am quite sure you would not allow that, Agatha; we must keep our secret for some time at least—afterward it will not matter, and I shall be only too proud to introduce you to the whole world; but for the present you will be content, will you not, with love, and with me?'

'I shall have all the world when I have you,' she said.

'Vane, it is not that I mistrust you; I do not—but it is all so new and so strange to me, I can hardly understand it. It is like a funeral where no one is dead. Let me ask papa what he thinks; he will know better than either of us.'

The simplicity of the words amused even while it irritated him. She was still a child in heart, do as he would, say what he would, it seemed impossible to shadow the innocence of the pure, simple soul.

'You must trust me all in all, Agatha,' he said. 'You must not speak of it either to father, friend, or anyone else. Our secret must rest with us. You say you trust me—give me a proof. I will put your faith in me to the test.'

'I will not fail,' she replied, 'test and try it as you will.'

'I believe you, and that makes me love you so dearly. The surest way that a woman can take to win a man's heart is to show unbounded faith in him. Now for my test. Bend your head a little lower, Agatha, and listen.'

## CHAPTER XII.

## THE BROKEN LILY.

**T**HIS is the test of your love, Agatha. Will you go away with me to-night, without telling to any creature what is to happen—go away with me, to be with me always and never to return? Will you believe what I say—that, pledged and plighted as we are, there is no need to go through the different forms and ceremonies affected by people. You shall have the wedding ring. I will put it on your finger, and it will bind us together fast as any vows.'

She trembled violently; in the whole of her short, simple life she had never heard such a question discussed—no one had spoken of marriage. After she had grown up she had been asked to some of the village weddings, and they had seemed to her as solemn as church services—all blessings and prayers. Whether there was any variation, and difference, she did not know, she had not thought of it; her instincts, keen and pure, told her it was wrong, but her feelings and wishes were not in accord with her reason.

'That is my test,' Agatha, he said. 'Come with me, and stay with me for all time—give me all the rest of your life without reserve; or let us part now—trust me all in all, or not at all.'

She trembled violently, and clung to his arm.

'May I just speak to Joan—ask Joan what she thinks?' she pleaded.

'No,' he replied sorrowfully. 'Unless you believe in me implicitly, give me no half faith. Do you want Joan to confirm what I tell you—do you appeal from me to her?'

'Oh, no, no!' she cried, 'it is not that; but it would comfort me so greatly to hear some one else speak of it—it is so new and strange to me.'

'Say no more, Agatha. You—you doubt me, and I can never forgive the doubt!'

And Sir Vane turned from her, as though he had tears in his eyes. The next instant the tender arms were round his neck.

'Has the test failed, my darling?' he asked, kissing her face. 'Has it failed?'

'No,' she replied. 'I will trust all to you. What you tell me is new and strange to me. It is not what I have been taught to believe; but the belief of my life I give up to you. You would not tell me what was not true. I will believe what you tell me on the good faith of your own word. I will and do believe that I am—'

She paused, and a hot blush covered her face.

'That you are my wife!' he cried, and he kissed the faltering lips that could not utter the words. 'And, darling, you will go with me? You will not let me go away lonely and wretched.'

'I will go,' she said.

'You promise inviolable secrecy—not one word to your father, or Joan, or any one else.'

'If you desire it I will be quite silent,' she replied.

'You will be as obedient as you are beautiful,' he cried, 'and an obedient wife is a great blessing.'

'I must love, honor, and obey,' she said. 'Those are such beautiful words, Vane; they comprise everything.'

'You will have plenty to do, Agatha darling, if you will go with me. Listen to my directions—write first a letter to your father; tell him you are married, and that you have gone away with your husband; that you will write to him in a short time, and that he need not have the least anxiety over you; you will be rich, happy, and beloved all your life. Add anything else you like; but be sure about this, write every word as I told you. Do not pack any boxes. We will go straight through to Paris, and there you shall buy everything you can possibly want.'

'Poor father!' she said, sadly; 'it seems very hard that my happiness should make his misery. Do you think he will miss me?'

'I should say that he will miss you very much, indeed, but he will be pleased to know that you are happy.'

The beautiful eyes, with their shadow of listless doubts, looked wistfully at him.



'No; nothing of the kind. He will be all right. Most fathers expect their daughters to marry at some time; why should not you? You can return to see him in a year or two.'

'What will the children do? What will all my poor people say?' she cried. 'There will be no one to comfort them when I am gone.'

'Would you rather have them than me?' he whispered.

'You?' she replied. 'You know, Vane; then there is the church and the organ, everything I have loved in my life.'

'You prefer me to all?' he said.

'Ah, yes; a thousand times yes,' she replied.

'If you feel down-hearted about it, Agatha, you must say, over and over again, to yourself, I am going to my love, who loves me, never to leave him again. You will have courage enough for anything if you will say that; and now I want you to listen to me still further. We will not go away together; we should be so easily traced. I shall leave the abbey at five in the morning; and you my darling come by the train that leaves Westbury at night. Take a ticket to Hetminster. I will meet you there, and we will go to London. Will your courage fail you?'

'No, I think not,' she said. 'But, oh, Vane, if it could have been different! If I could have gone with you to church like other girls do, I should have been much happier. You will laugh at me, I know, yet I must say good-by to the beautiful Agatha on the eastern window. I wonder—it is a foolish wonder I know; but if she could speak, what would she say to me?'

But even he, who dared to lead this pure and innocent soul to ruin, had not the courage to put on the lips of this Christian virgin words that were of the devil's creed.

He laughed, but there was something constrained and embarrassed in his laugh. He had said to himself it would be piquant to woo and win a saint. He did not find it so pleasant. There was a sense of shame in his victory. The odds had been so greatly in his favor.

He remained with her another hour caressing and soothing her, making her heart glad with his loving words. Her heart beat with his kisses and thanks.

He never tired of calling her his wife. And the name had a magical influence over her. When they parted, every arrangement had been made for the meeting on the morrow.

He watched the girlish, graceful figure, as Agatha walked slowly down the lane.

He had won the victory; she would be his, this beautiful girl who had hitherto been content with a life of charity—his! and he did not believe that any other could have won her.

Yet he was not quite happy—a matter which surprised him. He did not sing to himself as he went through the green fields—yet, what did it matter? She was only a doctor's daughter. He went home through the lanes, and passed through the church-yard, as he had done once before, to shorten the distance. How well he remembered seeing her there, under the ivy-covered porch, with the light on her face that would shine there nevermore.

As he passed through the grounds to the abbey, he saw a tall white lily growing alone—a fair lily, whose petals were like snow—and with one blow of his stick he cut it down.

That should not stand up in the face of the blue heavens while she fell!

Some voice had spoken and startled him. Whether it was pity, regret, remorse, who shall say? but as he looked round just before he entered the house, something like a curse rose to his lips that he had ever seen the place at all.

He tried to say to himself that it would have been a cruel thing to have left one so beautiful to fade away in this unknown village; but he could not blind himself as he had blinded her. Little sleep came to him that night. He left early in the morning, having made his adieus over night, and the last thing he saw, as he left the grounds, was the beautiful white lily he had wantonly slain the night before, lying dead on the grass.

'What sentimental nonsense have I taken up?' he said to himself; 'and what a flower, beaten and dead, can have to do with my beautiful love, Agatha, I cannot imagine.'

Yet he knew best why the flower reminded him of her.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## A WOMAN WITHOUT A FEMALE FRIEND.

**T**WO years have passed since Sir Vane persuaded Agatha Brooke to leave home with him. Two years had changed her from a beautiful girl into a magnificent woman. She was just twenty now, and a more perfect vision of loveliness had never gladdened man's eyes. She had grown since she left Whitecroft; she was taller and stronger, the look of delicacy had given place to most perfect health. Thought, travel, much reading and the deep love that filled her heart had given to her face an expression of refinement and intellect; her beauty was of the highest type, her education was complete; she had learned French and Italian, she had perfected her lovely voice; she was better read, and had clearer ideas than most women of her age. She was a delightful companion—she could talk well and brilliantly on any topic, her words were well chosen and picturesque; her mind was well stored with fact and poetry. A graceful, beautiful, accomplished woman, and Sir Vane repented more than once that he had not made her mistress of Silverdale. It seemed to him a thousand pities that she must spend her life in concealment; her beauty and talents would have adorned any rank. He saw it now that it was too late. It was too late—he had so adroitly kept her to himself that she still retained intact her old faith and belief in him. He knew her well enough now to be quite sure that if her faith and trust died, her love would be as surely slain. He knew that if she once understood how he had misled her, she would never look upon his face again. He thought of it long and often, for he had awakened to the perfect conviction that so long as he lived he should find no other woman like Agatha. One or two little incidents had happened that would have opened the eyes of a more wordly woman. It happened that they reached Florence when one of the court festivals was celebrated, and they found all the hotels crowded.

English, French and Americans, lovers of court spectacles, were all gathered, and Sir Vane, still travelling as Mr. Heriot, was compelled to put up with two small rooms at the Hotel de l'Orient; and at this same hotel, as he went down the grand staircase he met an old friend with whom he had been at college—Captain Farmer—who, with his wife and children, was staying there. In his genial, cheery manner, the captain cried out:

'Sir Vane, how glad I am to see you. How long it is since we met.'

Then, perceiving Agatha, he took off his hat, with a low, sweeping bow, evidently thinking she was Lady Carlyon.

'Are you staying here?' he asked. 'I am glad. My wife and children are here. I cannot tell you how delighted I am to see you.'

But there was little response in Sir Vane's handsome face. His friend went on careless of everything, except his pleasure at the meeting.

'I did not know you were married. They told me at the "Carlton" that you had disappeared somewhere—that no one knew your whereabouts.'

Then he stopped abruptly, for he saw that Sir Vane had no intention whatever of introducing him to the lovely woman at his side.

Sir Vane whispered a few words to her, and she went slowly up stairs again; then, and with a pale face, he turned to his old friend.

'You are mistaken,' he said, 'I am not married. You will excuse me, just now, at least. I must decline any introduction to Mrs. Farmer. May I ask you also not to mention my name? I am known here as Mr. Heriot.'

The Captain's gay face clouded over.

'You will never learn sense Sir Vane. I was honestly glad to think you were married to an angel like that girl—what a good and beautiful face.'

'I wish to Heaven I were married!' he said, with a groan. 'I need not ask you Farmer, to say nothing of this; we are leaving to-morrow, and it is not worth while to have any scandal.'

His heart was on his lips as he asked the question ; he had placed her in the very position in which she was liable to slight and insult, but he could not have borne to see it—a quiver of pain on her sweet face would have maddened him.

‘I quite understand,’ said the Captain ; ‘you may rest assured of my silence. I will not speak of having met you even to my wife. I do not wish to preach, but I should like to ask if you have ever thought what the end of all this will be ? It does not seem to me so very long since Lady H—— lost home and friends for you.’

‘That has nothing to do with the question,’ said Sir Vane, haughtily. ‘I thank you for your promise of secrecy. Forget you have met me. Good-by.’

The genial gladness had all faded from the captain’s face ; he looked stern and grave.

‘Good-by Sir Vane,’ he repeated, sorrowing in his heart for what he felt to be the degradation of his old friend. They parted, not to meet again for many long years.

Slowly enough Sir Vane went up the staircase after Agatha, she stood there blushing and smiling. She laid her arms round his neck, and hid her blushing face on his breast.

‘Oh, Vane,’ she said, ‘How did he know that we were married ?’

‘He took it for granted, I suppose, seeing us here together.’

‘Will it matter ? Will he speak of it ? Will it be known now ?’ she asked. ‘Are you quite sure that it will not harm you ?’

‘He will not speak of it darling. No, no harm can come to me.’

But he dare not tell her that he distinctly told his friend he was not married. That same afternoon she was going up the grand staircase alone ; and on the first landing—large as a room—a lady stood waiting with a little boy.

A beautiful, rosy-tinted boy, with long, fair curls. A sudden rush of memory filled her heart when she saw him, and thought of the children at Whitecroft who had loved her so dearly. The child looked at her with laughing eyes as she passed, and the little riding-whip he held fell to the ground ; she stooped to recover it, and held it out to him.

‘I thank you,’ said the boy, in such clear, perfect English.

She was just a little startled, and said :

‘ You are English ? ’

‘ Yes,’ he replied, ‘ I am English.’

Just at that moment a stern voice called :

‘ Charlie ! ’

‘ Yes, papa,’ the boy answered.

‘ Come here, I want you.

And looking up, Agatha saw the same gentleman who had claimed Sir Vane as his friend—the only one she thought, in simple heart, who had spoken of their marriage. He never looked at her, but came forward and took the lady and child away. There was something in his manner which told her that he had done it purposely—that he would not allow his wife and child to speak to her.

‘ Why did he do it Vane ? ’ she asked afterward, when she was describing the scene. ‘ Why would he not let the boy speak to me ? ’

‘ I cannot tell,’ said Vane ; most probably we have lost caste in his eyes by taking rooms on the fifth story, but we could not help it.’

She laughed.

‘ How foolish ! I should never care where anybody lodged or lived,’ she said.

She did not doubt him. They did and said such wonderful things in this world of his, she never pretended to understand them. At last she did begin to think it strange that she had not made one lady friend since she left Whitecroft. With the exception of the servants in the different hotels, she had not spoken to a woman. When they were quite among foreigners, Sir Vane introduced her as Mrs. Heriot, and spoke of her as ‘ my wife.’ With English people they rarely associated, and she knew none by name.

‘ Vane,’ she said one morning, ‘ I am tired of seeing all men’s faces. I wish I knew a nice girl. I should like a girl friend.’

‘ When I see one nice enough for you to know, I shall be glad, too,’ he said. ‘ But Agatha, you are not growing tired of me, are you ? ’

She made an answer that delighted him. Such love as hers never grows cold or dies, unfortunately.

He saw more clearly every hour that the moment in which she should learn how he had betrayed her would be the last they should spend together; and he loved her each day more and more.

He had but one desire now, and it was that they should go farther away from the beaten track, where they would not be exposed to these scenes. Spain — Germany — Switzerland? Where should he go? What corner of the land was free from the intrusion of English people, with their narrow ideas? It seemed to him like an inspiration when he read that a Swiss lady, residing at Lucerne, wished to receive an English family for the summer. There, away from babels and great cities—away from the throng of tourists—there would surely be peace. He wrote at once, and his letter was answered by Madame la Baronne D'Envers—a Swiss lady, who gave him every particular about the Chateau Bellefleurs, and told him frankly that she had lost the greater part of her fortune during the Franco-German war, and was compelled to let her house during the greater part of the year.

It was quite retired, beautiful beyond all words; yet if he wished for a little change, he could easily reach some of the fairest cities in Switzerland. Sir Vane was delighted; at last they would have perfect peace, and he should have his beautiful Agatha all to himself. Some few years ago the prospect of a Chateau by a Swiss lake, with nothing but hills and mountains around, would have filled him with dismay; but now he longed for it—love had transformed him.

'It will be the most delightful life in the whole world!' cried Agatha, when he consulted her. 'And, Vane, do you not think that my father could come to see us there?'

He promised that he would think of it.

Madame D'Envers had written very frankly to him. It was certainly dull, she said—she would not hide that from him; dull except to those who loved nature, or had great resources in themselves.

'My great resource is you Agatha,' said Sir Vane, when he read the letter; 'we could never be dull when we are together.'

Madame went on to state the number of servants, and added that her husband's niece, Mademoiselle Valerie D'Envers, lived with her, but spent the greater part of her time in Paris.

Sir Vane never thought of that part of the letter again until he saw Valerie—then the world changed.

They started at once for their new home ; Sir Vane was most impatient ; but if he had known what was waiting for him on the shores of the blue lake, he would rather have been dead than have gone there.

They were delighted with the Chateau ; it well deserved its name of 'Beautiful Flowers,' for it was literally smothered with them. Nothing could have been more picturesque or beautiful. Flowers of every hue, of every description, of every kind of loveliness ; they climbed the walls, they peeped in at the windows, they covered the doors and the iron railings, the gardens were filled with them.

The whole place seemed laughing in the sunshine ; the fragrance of the flowers greeted them.

'How happy we shall be here, Vane !' cried Agatha.

He kissed her beautiful face, as he answered :

'We should be happy anywhere together.'

And he meant what he said.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## SIR VANE'S WARNING.

**M**R. and Mrs. Heriot,' as madame la baronne implicitly believed them to be, were very warmly welcomed at the Chateau Bellefleurs ; every preparation had been made for them. Two magnificent suites of apartments, overlooking the lake, were set aside for them. Madame and her niece occupied the other side. They would be as free from intrusion as though living in their own house. Madame had reserved one small part of the garden for herself and her niece ; all the rest was at their disposal. Any friends they might care to invite could be well accommodated. Madame la baronne received them herself. She had been a handsome woman, but was now somewhat *passé* ; she was a thorough aristocrat, al-



though she was compelled to let part of her ancient house; Sir Vane was delighted when he saw her.

'No fear of vulgar curiosity there,' he said to himself; 'she is a gentlewoman.'

Madame showed them round the grounds, the house, appointed the different servants that were to wait upon them; ordered dinner, showed them the piano and the organ, of which she was very proud, and then said *au revoir*. As she left them, turning with a graceful bow to Sir Vane, she said:

'I know, Mr. Heriot, that you seek solitude here—your letter told me as much—therefore I shall never intrude upon you; but if at any time Mrs. Heriot would like a chat or a stroll, I shall be only too pleased. My niece and myself speak good English; her mother was an Englishwoman.'

He thanked her, and Agatha turned to him with smiling eyes.

'Oh Vane, I am glad—I am so pleased! It seems so long since I have spoken even to a lady.'

'Hush, Agatha,' he said, 'you must be careful not to let madame hear that. Our circumstances have been peculiar. As a rule, it would be very unwise to say that you have no lady friends.'

'Then I will not say it,' she replied. 'I will be careful and remember; but, all the same, I am so heartily glad.'

'I am glad for you darling. Do be careful; do not speak of yourself in any way, or of me, unless you cannot avoid it without being singular.'

'I will be most careful,' she said; and she kept her word.

They found life at the Chateau Bellefleurs a taste of Paradise; the scenery around was so magnificent, the lake so clear and blue, the grand mountains in the distance covered with snow, eternally white and calm, the green, lovely shores, the endless variety of scene. It was beautiful to rise in the morning and breakfast while she looked on the blue lake, to watch the pleasure-boats and the shadows on the waters. Sir Vane purchased a boat, and never tired of rowing Agatha from shore to shore. It was the calmest, sweetest, brightest life that had ever fallen to any one's lot. Agatha was extremely happy; this fair picturesque home of theirs was most delightful.

They drove into Lucerne for the sake of variety ; they went once or twice to a ball, more frequently to the theatre, and they never met any of the compatriots whom Sir Vane so heartily dreaded.

'I have never been so happy in my whole life,' he said, one day, to Agatha. 'I should like to live here always.'

'Must we go away?' she asked.

'Not yet, at least; and, perhaps, not for a long time. I must go to England sometime.'

'Never without taking me?' she said.

'Never,' he replied, kissing the beautiful, loving face.

It was the month of June then; they had not been seven weeks at the chateau, and madame la baronne had grown much attached to the gentle, beautiful lady. She found her so well bred, so gifted, so fair, in every sense of the word. Nothing pleased madame more than to take Mrs. Heriot through the beautiful grounds that reached even to the shore of the lake. She discovered at once that Mrs. Heriot did not care to talk about herself or her antecedents, and she never made the least attempt to induce her to do so. A sincere liking existed between them, and, for her sake, Sir Vane was pleased to see it.

He was answering a business letter one morning, and it occurred to him that he had been away from England more than two years, and that during the whole of that time he had been constant to his love. Never before in his life had he loved longer than two months. He wondered if the time would ever come when he should tire of the angel face and gentle manner of his fair young love. For the thousandth time, he regretted that he had not married her. He believed it was within the bounds of possibility that he might have been true to her for life.

That same evening, while they were at dinner, Sir Vane fancied that he heard a carriage driving up to the entrance. Agatha said :

'That must be madame's niece. She was to return to-day.'

'Madame's niece!' he repeated, absently.

He had almost forgotten that mention had been made of such a person; he would never forget it again.

'I am sorry our peace is invaded, Agatha. How quiet and happy we have been!'

'She will not interfere with us,' said Agatha. Madame often speaks to me of her. She spends all her time here at the piano. Madame is very fond of her.'

It was a matter of perfect indifference to Sir Vane, who finished his dinner, and took his cigar out on the terrace. Agatha did not follow him at once, and he sat there thinking.

Suddenly, at the other end of the garden, he saw the tall, graceful figure of a girl, with red roses in her dark hair—a figure that was perfect in its subtle grace, perfect in its symmetry. A tight-fitting dress of dark velvet showed every line and every graceful curve to perfection, but the face was turned from him.

'Madame's niece,' said Sir Vane to himself; 'and a grand figure too. What shoulders! She has the same inimitable turn of the neck that I admired so much in the Diana of the Louvre. The face will not match the figure—it never does.'

He found himself watching every movement of the tall slender figure, and every movement was so perfect. She stood looking over the orange trees, her white hands clasped and looking like ivory as they lay listlessly against her velvet dress. Then she bent forward, and from the crown of her head to the long sweep of velvet that lay on the grass was one perfect line of beauty. Then she gathered some of the heavy red roses that grew so plentifully, and placed them in her dress. She walked up and down the pretty terrace that overlooked the lake, and he said to himself that it was the very poetry of motion—but he did not see her face.

Agatha came with the books and papers, and he forgot the girl with the red roses in her dark hair.

'Vane, madame's niece is come,' said Agatha, and Sir Vane gave some languid answer; except that she had a perfect figure and moved with perfect grace, he had no interest in madame's niece.

'She is so beautiful,' continued Agatha; 'but not at all like Englishwomen.'

They sat out on the terrace until the sun set, and then by the moonlight they went to the shores of the lake that looked like a sea of calm, quiet silver. Neither of them thought or spoke of madame's niece again.

A beautiful woman, with red roses in her dark hair and in her dress, sat talking to madame.

These visitors of yours do not make much difference in your life, aunt,' she said.

'Not much, Valerie, but that it is more cheerful to know they are here.'

'Do you never go out with them?' she asked.

'I have been several times on the lake with Mrs. Heriot.'

'Heriot,' repeated the girl, with a scornful drooping of her full, curved lips. 'I know English names very well, aunt, but this is strange to me. "Heriot;" it is not noble.'

'It is not? I do not suppose he is noble, Valerie, but he has plenty of money.'

'That is a very good thing,' sighed the girl. 'Oh, aunt, how I long for money.'

'You must marry well,' said madame.

'That is just where my character is so utterly inconsistent, and where I shall fail altogether. I love money—I want money—no one can want it more; but I feel sure I shall marry for love.'

'Hush, my dear!' said madame, who did not think that at all a decorous word on the lips of a girl.

Valerie laughed.

'It is a dreadful thing to speculate about, aunt, is it not? But about your lodgers—I thought you told me they were so wealthy?'

'So they are, Valerie,' said madame, complacently. 'I believe if Mrs. Heriot could eat gold and drink pearls, her husband would get both for her. I have seen much of married life, but I never saw such devotion—it is quite touching.'

'Does he love her so much?' asked Valerie, quickly.

'I never knew how much a man could love a woman until I saw Mr. Heriot. There is plenty of money. The strangest thing about them is, that they will not have servants of their own, and do not care to meet English people.'

'A long honey-moon, I suppose,' laughed Valerie. 'The English are queer people. Mr. and Mrs. Heriot must be a small fortune to you, my dear aunt.'

'I must not complain,' replied madame. 'One thing, I avow, as need drove me to let part of my home, I could not have possibly met with nicer people than Mr. and Mrs. Heriot.'

'I am quite anxious to see them,' said Valerie.

And that night, when the pretty chateau of Bellefleurs lay in the white moonlight, no one dreamed of the tragedy dawning under its roof.

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## CHAPTER XV.

'HIS WIFE MUST BE HAPPY.'

SIR VANE, enjoying his cigar, was walking through the beautiful grounds alone. Agatha was occupied with some pretty fancy work—something she was making for madame. She had grown warmly attached to madame. She had liked Lady Anne very much, but there was a warmth about the Swiss lady that the rector's wife lacked. Vane was strolling carelessly on his favorite promenade—the terrace that overlooked the lake, when he saw the same graceful figure that had attracted his attention the night before.

'Madame's niece again,' he thought. 'I hope this place is not to be pervaded by her.'

Then he saw her face. She was sitting on a quaint old carved seat that stood close to a marble faun. She had been busy gathering roses for madame's rooms, and sat down to rest with the basket of roses in her hands. Her attitude and pose were of the most perfect grace—but studied to the last degree. She knew that by half-turning her head the graceful lines of her neck were seen to greatest advantage; she knew that when her hand lay upon the roses, its beauty of color and shape could be perfectly seen.

She was the true type of the Parisienne beauties; always dressed with the greatest care and elegance; polished, suave, and caressing in manner, with a worship for appearance rarely equalled.—She had pondered for some time how she should meet Mr. Heriot; not that she had any idea at that time of seeking to gain his attention. The innate instincts of coquetry told her that he was a rich English gentleman, who might be to her a very useful friend: therefore, she would do her best to

attract his notice, and to please him. She was a great believer in making friends, and in making them useful to herself. She had decided, in her own mind, that the most beautiful association a man could have with woman was through flowers. If he saw her first gathering or tending to them, he would always for the future associate her with them. So according to her own arrangement, he found her with the basket of blooming roses, which seemed to absorb her whole attention.

She started as he came in sight; and rising hurriedly, the roses fell in a crimson shower to the ground. Could anything have been better, prettier, or more picturesque? She uttered a low, musical cry of dismay, and Sir Vane hurried to her.

'That is my fault,' he said, raising his hat. 'I am sorry I started you.'

'I am sorry to have dropped my roses, and given trouble,' she replied.

'They shall soon be back in the basket,' he said, 'if you will intrust it to me.'

'Have I the pleasure,' she said, 'of speaking to Mr Heriot?' He bowed.

'I have the pleasure of addressing the lady known to us lately by the title of madame's niece.'

'I am Mademoiselle D'Envers,' she replied with stately grace.

And Sir Vane bowed again.

'I hope,' she added 'that I am not intruding on any part of the grounds that are appropriated to your use, Mr. Heriot?'

'There can be no question of intrusion,' he replied.

And he felt that to meet this beautiful, dark-eyed, brilliant girl in the sunlit gardens would be a pleasant rarity; but not too often. And she read his thoughts with wonderful clearness.

'He is wondering whether I shall bore him,' she thought—'whether I shall come too often, and interfere with the honey-moon *tête-à-têtes*.'

'You are very kind, monsieur,' she said 'but I must not avail myself too often of your kindness. It is strange that this terrace is my favorite spot, and it is also yours.'

'It is. But I shall not like to think that I have deprived you of the pleasure of frequenting it.'

She looked up at him with a frank smile that attracted him irresistibly.

'I must watch my opportunities,' she said 'and go when monsieur is absent.'

He laughed, and began to pick up the roses.

'I shall not know how to arrange them as tastefully as you have done, he said; 'but I will give them all to you.'

Nothing could have been more pleasant, she thought, with a smile.

And the next few minutes passed happily in the fresh sunlit air, with the odor of roses all round them.

'How handsome and how kind he is!' thought Valerie. 'His wife must be happy.'

She was too adroit to flatter him—she knew that Englishmen looked on flattery with great suspicion—but during that short interview she gave him to understand, with great tact and skill, that she admired him.

'I am always so pleased to see fresh faces at Bellefleurs,' she said. 'The chateau is very beautiful, but far too quiet for my taste.'

'And to mine, its solitude is its greatest charm,' said Sir Vane.

She laughed again, that pleasant, frank laugh of hers which Sir Vane liked to hear.

'That is because you have brought all your world with you,' she said. 'A desert would doubtless seem like paradise under similar circumstances. I have no world.'

'The loss is the world's not yours,' he retorted with a bow. 'I can imagine that you find Bellefleurs very quiet.'

'Those who are getting tired of life like my aunt, and those who are looking eagerly forward to it like myself, could never be very happy together,' she said.

'I suppose not,' agreed Sir Vane.

His thoughts had wandered to Agatha. She was quick enough to perceive that his interest was failing, and she was too clever to remain after that. She rose from her garden-chair.

'Thank you for your help, Mr. Heriot,' she said, 'and good morning.'

He watched the graceful walk, the easy carriage, with the same pleasure as he would have listened to a strain of sweet

music. Then he went in search of Agatha. Ah! what rest, what pleasure in her fair presence, what calm and repose! He forgot Valerie, talking to her; and nothing could show how deeply he loved Agatha better than this fact, that he, who had been so great an admirer of beautiful women, did not think twice during the day of the one who determined that she should always be associated in his mind with roses.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## 'AN ANGEL AND A COQUETTE.'

**V**ALERIE D'Envers stood before the large mirror in her room, looking with intent eyes at the face reflected there. It was fair enough surely to charm any man—oval in shape, brilliantly tinted, with large, bright eyes, dark as night. Surely if any face could win admiration, hers could—brilliant, sparkling, piquant. Yet it had not won any of the great prizes of life for her. She was twenty, and though she had legions of admirers, no one had yet been over to Madame la Baronne to ask for the honor of her hand. There was an indefinable something about her that startled most men; she was beautiful, polished, and graceful, but there was a foreshadowing of violent passions in her; one felt instinctively that she could be jealous, envious, and bitter.

'Evidently,' she said to herself, as she looked earnestly in the mirror, 'I have not made any great impression on the English people—they have not asked to see me.'

Valerie had been three days at the chateau, and as yet no invitation had been sent to her, nor had she seen Sir Vane again. He could not have been much impressed with her, never to remember her existence. She had puzzled herself over it, but, with her usual skill, had come to the right conclusion—it was not so much because he had not admired her as that he was entirely engrossed with his young wife; and a sharp pang of envy shot through her heart. Why were fates



so unequal? Why was fortune so unkind? Why should one girl be idolized by a handsome, rich husband, and another, equally young and beautiful, be passed by? She went to her mirror, to be quite sure if she were as attractive as she had always imagined herself to be. The answer was certainly a reassuring one; her face pleased herself—why should it not please others?

She had been much struck during these few days by the evidence of wealth and luxury shown by these English people—they did not seem even to understand the value of money. If monsieur thought that anything would please his wife, he ordered it; and to Valerie, accustomed to the economical ordering of things, this was wonderful. It added another pang of envy to that which she felt already. At last came the invitation she had been so long expecting—a courteous, kindly little note from Agatha, asking if madame and mademoiselle would join them in spending an hour or two on the lake. Madame declined, but was most delighted to accept for mademoiselle, who dressed herself with the greatest artistic skill, in colors best suited to her brilliant tints and dark eyes. Even if the English monsieur had no eyes to admire her with, they might meet friends of his. Valerie had not realized yet the complete solitude in which they lived. For the first time these three, who were so strongly to influence each other's lives, were together.

The morning was fresh and beautiful, the waters of the lake clear as crystal, the sky without a cloud, the air balmy and odorous with the breath of a hundred flowers—a morning to make even the most miserable happy. Sir Vane looked at the two beautiful women. Agatha's face was bright as with the light of a soul to whom nature was dear, and whose thoughts rose from nature to nature's God; Valerie, with the pleasure that comes from gratified vanity and well-pleased senses. 'An angel and a coquette,' thought Sir Vane, as they sat side by side in the boat.

It was the most delightful morning for a row, they agreed, and conversation went on easily enough, but it was not of the kind they generally indulged in; they talked generally of the scenery around them, of the waters, and the lonely shores, and of all the thoughts to which such scenes give rise. Valerie

had just returned from Paris, and she had caught the perfect tone of Parisian *salons*. She could tell them the latest news of the emperor and empress. She could retail, in a brilliant fashion all her own, all the court scandal and gossip—what the emperor had said of the American beauty; and how the emperor distinguished certain noble Englishwomen by his attentions; she knew why this marriage between a Russian duke and a French princess had been broken off; she knew the whole history of the beautiful young duchess whose romantic suicide had filled all Paris with gloom.

Sir Vane listened at first indifferently, but in a short time he warmed to the subject. It was so long since he had heard this kind of conversation; all the brilliant *bon mots* that she repeated; all the witty repartees; the piquant stories amused him, and made him laugh as he had not done for many long months. What a witty, wicked, brilliant world this was from which he had shut himself out! He did not sigh for it, long for, or desire it; but this passing breath of it was sweet to him. He began at last to talk himself with some animation; while, for the first time since they had left England, Agatha sat by in silence. She did not mind it in the least, she was so pleased to see him happy. The sound of their laughter died away on the blue waters; there was a ring in Sir Vane's voice. How he enjoyed these stories of men and women whose names she had no interest for! She fell into her old strain of thoughts, and did not even hear the point of the stories until Sir Vane said to her:

'Agatha, where are your thoughts?'

'On the water,' she replied, laughing. 'I may say in this boat.'

'I am afraid we are monopolizing the conversation; it cannot be very amusing to you, Agatha.'

Valerie looked up quickly.

'I beg a thousand pardons,' she said; 'but has not madame been to Paris?'

'Oh, yes; I was in Paris for some months.'

'Then you must have known and seen some of these people,' said Valerie.

Agatha's face flushed. She remembered that during the whole of the time they had been there she had not spoken to a lady. Sir Vane came to the rescue.

'Mrs. Heriot was not well or strong just then,' he said, and we lived very quietly. We amused ourselves by seeing the finest sights in Paris, but we did not go into society.'

'Ah!' said Valerie, with a long drawn breath.

There was not much in the monosyllable, but Sir Vane felt that he had fallen, socially at least, in her estimation; he was a rich Englishman, but evidently he had not the *entré* of the French court. He heard it in the sound of her voice and saw it in the expression of her face. What would she have thought had she known there was no princess at that imperial court but would have been proud of the attentions of the Englishman before her?

'That must have been a trial for you,' said Valerie, turning to Agatha; never to have seen Paris must be dreadful, but to have been there and yet not to have joined in the most brilliant gayeties in the world must have been a trial.'

'It was no trial to me,' replied Agatha. 'I could never care for such things.'

'Not for court balls!' cried Valerie, with astonishment, so genuine that Sir Vane and Agatha both laughed.

'Not even for court-balls,' she replied; 'my tastes and desires do not lie in that line at all.'

'Mine do,' said Valerie frankly.

And then Sir Vane asked if they would like to land and stroll about on the lovely green shore. While he fastened the boat the two ladies went on. Valerie said suddenly:

'Mrs. Heriot, should you mind my asking you what name it is you give to your husband?—it struck me as being very peculiar.'

She wondered why that flush rose and fell on that gentle face.

'What name do you mean?' asked Agatha wondering if the surname of Carlyon had in any way come to light.

'Your husband's name—the one by which you address him. Is it Fane?'

'No, it is Vane,' replied Agatha.

And Valerie said, musingly:

'Vane Heriot, a very English name, is it not?—and a nice one.'

'It is uncommon,' replied Agatha, briefly.

She did not quite like to discuss her husband's name with this brilliant stranger. Then Sir Vane overtook them.

It seemed quite natural that he should walk between them; he would make Agatha talk, and show less interest in the Parisian stories.

'My wife knows such pretty legends of flowers and trees,' he said, and Valerie looked up with supreme indifference.

'Does she?' she said. 'They all seem to me very much alike.'

Sir Vane laughed.

'Just what kings, queens, courtiers, court-balls, and society stories are to you, trees and flowers are to her,' he said.

'She is easily satisfied,' said Valerie, and again he detected the faintest accent of contempt in her voice.

It amused him greatly; he understood Valerie so well; her keen, worldly nature, with its love and appreciation of wealth and luxury, was quite transparent to him. She was the type of woman he had known well and had despised years ago. Yet there was something fresh and piquant about her.

Valerie, as the time passed on that morning, became more and more resolved to cultivate these English people, and make great friends of them. She saw that if she wished to please the husband, she must please the wife, and she did what was, under the circumstances, the very wisest thing she could do—paid far more attention to Agatha than to Sir Vane. Of course he perceived it—equally, of course, he understood the motive.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

'YOU NEVER TELL ME OF YOUR LIFE.'

FOUR weeks had passed since Valerie D'Envers returned to Bellefleurs, and already there was some trifling change in the place. She had given herself up to the indulgence of two different feelings—one was dislike and bitter jealousy of Agatha, the other great and boundless admiration for her husband.

'How happy such a lot in life would have made me,' she said to herself. 'Why should she have so much and I so little?'

She knew and understood the infinite superiority of Agatha, and became bitterly jealous of her—Sir Vane was so devoted; and even her aunt, she saw, loved Agatha best. Side by side with this feeling grew one worse—an unbounded admiration and reckless liking for Sir Vane. He was so handsome, so courtly; she liked the dark, beautiful face and the rich voice, the gentle, caressing manner—Sir Vane was always deferential to women. Of all the men she had met, she liked him first and best. It angered her that he had fallen to the lot of this fair Englishwoman, whose looks differed so entirely from her own. Why could not fortune have reserved him for her, or at least have given her a similar chance?

Agatha, who was as unconscious of her jealousy and envy as she was of her growing liking for Sir Vane's society, liked the brilliant young beauty; and when Sir Vane was reading his daily papers, or otherwise engaged, the two young girls passed many happy hours together. During these hours Valerie told her whole history to Agatha, described all the friends she had in Paris, all the gayeties of that beautiful Parisian life; told her of all her admirers, and gave her to understand that it was entirely her own fault she had not made one of these aspirants happy. One day she looked at Agatha and said:

'You never tell me of your life, Mrs. Heriot; but it must have been a very pleasant one.'

Again the warm flush on the beautiful face, and the wild longing that she, too, could have spoken fully of her life, of the old-fashioned village, the gray old church, the eastern window with its fair young saint holding the palm-branch; of the simple people who had loved her so dearly, and who called her 'The Angel of the Poor.' She would have liked, in her turn, to have spoken of these things so near and dear to her heart, but her lips were sealed and dumb.

'My life has been very quiet,' she said. 'I lived always with my dear father in a quiet country home. The only event in it was my love and my marriage.'

'Very excellent events, too, Mrs. Heriot,' laughed Valerie, 'for you, as well as for Mr. Heriot. Love is life.'

'But your own friends and relations—do you never care to speak of them?' and Agatha turned away as she answered:

'They live always in my heart.'

'Aunt,' said Valerie, one morning to La Baronne, 'I should not be at all surprised if there were something just a little strange about Mrs. Heriot.'

'Strange! In what way, Valerie?' asked madame.

'She does not belong to the same class as her husband, I am quite sure. They have belonged to different worlds before they came here.'

'I never found this much out,' said madame, dryly.

'I have,' said her niece. 'I do not pretend to say which was which, but I am sure they were not equal. It is possible he may have been below her in station, or she may have been below him; but that there was some disparity I feel sure.'

Then some little change appeared. Sir Vane, who had shrugged his shoulders at his wife's invitations to madame's niece, said frequently:

'Let us ask mademoiselle to go out with us this evening;' or, 'Mademoiselle Valerie will go with us on the lake, if you ask her, Agatha. She amuses me.'

After two years' unswerving constancy, he felt that he was really entitled to some little reward, and if this brilliant young beauty could amuse, please, and flatter him at the same time why should she not? So it came to pass that the invitations were more frequent, and at last Valerie spent so much time with them, they were almost like one family.

Sir Vane never dreamed of a flirtation with her; it was the last thing that occurred to him. But Valerie was queen of the whole science, and it was impossible always to avoid the plot she laid for him. She had a peculiar faculty for finding out when he was alone; for meeting him in the garden and grounds when Agatha was absent; and Sir Vane was never very strong at resisting the advances of a beautiful woman. He met smiles with smiles, repartee with repartee. If she gathered a flower for him, he once or twice kissed the white hand which held it. Yet, in justice to him, it must be said that he behaved in the same manner to her when Agatha was present as when she was absent. She had lost nothing of her charm for him. Insensibly they drifted into a half-sentimental kind of flirtation, which delighted Valerie, but was the most dangerous and fatal thing

which could have happened to her. Agatha was too simple and unsuspecting to notice it, although one or two things did seem to her strange. They had arranged one morning to go on the lake; but when the appointed hour came Agatha had a headache, and could not go. Sir Vane would at once have given up the idea, but Agatha begged of him not to disappoint Valerie, and Sir Vane turned to her with laughter in his eyes.

'It will be a terrible infringement of the laws of etiquette, if I do persuade you to go, mademoiselle,' he said.

'I am quite ready to infringe them, she replied; 'indeed, I should enjoy it.'

'Then we will go,' he said.

And to him the idea of rowing this brilliant beauty on the lake was by no means displeasing.

Once out on the clear blue waters, she turned to him.

'I love the lake,' she said, 'and I was afraid you were going to disappoint me after all.'

'Why need you have thought that?' he asked.

'You seem to have such notions of etiquette and propriety. I do think English people are so——'

'So what?' he asked, seeing that she paused and laughed.—

'So stupid,' she replied, 'and so narrow in their ideas.'

'I can bear that, and more, from you,' he replied.

And then she became her most brilliant self; she talked to him and amused him, until he was really attracted by her ready wit and brilliancy. She took a sudden and pretty caprice for learning to row, and her little hands flashed so white and fair with their shining jewels, he could not help admiring them; and while giving her lessons in the art of rowing, what was more natural than that he should hold those pretty hands in his. She grew more beautiful and more brilliant as he grew more demonstrative in his admiration.

'I have enjoyed that hour,' she said. 'I am almost sorry that we must go back. Will Mrs. Heriot think you too long?'

'I hope not,' he replied, suddenly growing serious. 'I should be very sorry if she missed me.'

'You spoil your wife, Mr. Heriot. She will always expect the same amount of attention from you.'

He looked at her in wonder.

'She will always receive it,' he said quietly.

And Valerie laughed to hide her confusion,

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## THE MARKED HANDKERCHIEF.

HERE were times when Sir Vane looked at his young wife and wondered whether it was possible to excite the feeling of jealousy within her. Not that he wished to do so; it was simply curiosity to know whether one so perfect, so seemingly far above all the meaner passions of earth could feel as other people did. He would have been pleased to know that Agatha was just a little jealous; he would have liked those white, tender arms laid round his neck, a faint gleam of reproach in the violet eyes, and a sweet voice to whisper, 'Did he really love her best.' That was the kind of thing that he understood and was accustomed to.

If Agatha had been inclined to jealousy she had plenty of cause. The time had been when Sir Vane had shrugged his shoulders at the mention of madame's niece, and lamented that their solitude was broken; but now it was quite a different matter! he seemed to look with eager longing for her.

'Ask Valerie to go with us,' were the words constantly on his lips, and Agatha never once hesitated.

It was natural, she said to herself, that he would like some one that could talk to him about his own world, of which she knew nothing. Sir Vane never meant to hurt her. When they were all three out together, it often happened that Valerie, laughing and jesting, walked with him, while Agatha went on alone. Then suddenly his heart would be touched, and hastening to her, he would say:

'Darling, why are you alone? Come with me.'

And it struck him with wonder that she always turned to him a face as sweet and bright as a loving face could be. It would have been better for them all had she looked just a little more keenly after her own interests; for Valerie, day by day, disliked her and liked her husband more and more,



There came a day, at the end of the beautiful summer, when the lovely air was faint with perfume, that they arranged to go to Lucerne together. Sir Vane was ready first, and waiting for the ladies in the drive. Madame could not go; she was only too well pleased that her niece should have the opportunities offered to her. She seldom, if ever, accepted an invitation for herself.

Valerie walked slowly down the drive, saw Sir Vane put his hand into the pocket of his coat—a coat that was either too small, or the pocket was too full, for a white handkerchief fell out and fluttered to the ground. She took it up, and her attention was at once attracted by a mark in the corner. She looked at it long and curiously. There was a crest, half worn away, and underneath the letters, 'V. H. C.'

She repeated them over and over again—'V. H. C.'—they were not his initials, they would have been simply 'V. H,' still it was strange that they should have been identical with his, with the addition of another letter—'V. H. C.' She tried to make out the crest or mark, but could not, and a faint idea that she had been right in suspecting a mystery came to her.

'I will see what he says when I give it him,' she thought, and she arranged it in such a fashion that the letters were the first thing on which his eyes must fall.

'Mr. Heriot,' she said suddenly, holding it out to him, 'is this yours?'

He looked to see what it was, and, as she anticipated, he saw the initials at once. She looked straight into his face, no passing expression could escape her, and she saw distinctly, when his eyes fell on the three letters, his color change.

'Is it yours?' she said, looking up at him with great innocent eyes.

'I hardly know,' he replied, with some hesitation.

'The initials are right, she said, laughingly; 'but there is a "C" added to them, which is not yours; yet I saw it fall from your hand.'

'It has been put with my things by mistake,' he said, but Valerie saw that all was not quite as it should be.

Sir Vane little dreamed, as he talked to her, and amused himself with her brilliancy, that she was trying to penetrate the dearest and nearest secrets of his heart. A few days after-

ward they were driving over to see some fine ruins, and, as usual, Sir Vane suggested to Agatha that Valerie should go with them, but she declined. She had quite made up her mind that the next time they went out she would look through their rooms, and try to find out if there was any repetition of these mysterious initials; so while Madame took her usual *siesta*, and the servants were all busily engaged, she went quietly to the suite of rooms occupied by Sir Vane. She was a lady by birth, and had all the instincts of good breeding. Her face flushed hotly when she found herself in those rooms.

'All is fair in love and war,' she said to herself. 'I know that which I am doing is mean—false—bad—but it is the only way in which I can discover the mystery, and I am quite justified in adopting it.'

She did not remember that in no possible way could this mystery concern her. There was a lingering hope always in her heart that something or other—she cared not what—would arise that should part husband and wife, and that she, herself, should take Agatha's place.

'I am a thousand times better suited to him. He likes brilliancy as much as he likes beauty, and that fair piece of perfection has none,' was her constant thought. She had hardly admitted, even to herself that she should like to see them parted, but it was exasperating to see so much love and devotion lavished on one while there was none for her.

Since the arrival of her lodgers at the chateau, Madame had never entered the part of the house reserved for them except once or twice by special invitation. A certain number of servants had been left in charge of it, and madame knew all was well. Valerie had said to herself that even if all the servants came in a body it would not matter. She had but to say that madame had desired her to inspect the rooms—no one could offer any objection to that. There was no prying eyes or curious lady's maid to interrupt her.

She was struck with the amount of luxury displayed in those dressing rooms. No want of money here, she was quite sure.

The first thing that attracted her attention was a magnificent dressing case mounted in silver; and here again on the richly chased bottles, on the ivory-backed hair brushes, on almost

every article of value belonging to him, she saw the same initials, 'V. H. C.' She found many of his things marked with a crest, and she admired very much a crown supporting an olive branch.

'No modern crest that, thought Valerie to herself.

Then on the toilet table lay a book that seemed to have been well used—'Keble's Christian Year,' and here, to her great delight, she found the coat-of-arms—an eagle, supported on either side by lions rampant.

'A warlike house,' she thought. 'And now, if I have any wit at all, I shall find out who he is. The initials are "V. H. C.," the crest, a crown and olive branch; coat-of-arms, an eagle, supported by two lions; motto, as written here, "Truth Conquers—*Vincit Veritas*." If, with all these landmarks, I cannot make my way, I am dull of wit and deserve to lose the game.'

Sir Vane's drawers and boxes containing private papers were locked; the locks were patent, and he carried the keys with him, or Valerie would soon have found out who he was and all about him.

'I will send to London for "Debrett's Peerage,"' she said to herself; 'and then, if these initials and arms are his, I shall know all about him.'

She went into Agatha's dressing room. There was a magnificent dressing case, far more costly than Sir Vane's; there were articles of luxury such as she had seldom seen—all presents given to Agatha by Sir Vane—the most exquisite and beautiful toilet appointments; but on no one single thing were either marks or initials.

'Just as I thought, she said to herself, with a triumphant smile. 'No name, no crest, no coat-of-arms here. Ah, Mrs. Heriot, you may be very fair, and you are very sweet, but why do you not share your husband's crest and motto? There is something to find out—and, as sure as I live, I shall find it out.'

She searched through everything. On one worn collar she found, marked in red cotton, the two letters, 'A. B.'

'I will remember them' she said to herself. "'A. B."—it may be Agatha Blythe, or Berdoe; there are many names beginning with "B."'

She was better rewarded for her trouble when among some books she found a copy of the oratorio of Samson. A name had been carefully erased—so carefully that, with all the skill in the world, she could not make it out; but she did make out the word 'Whitecroft.'

'Whitecroft,' she mused; 'that is the very name for a country village—I shall remember it.'

And long before Sir Vane and Agatha returned, she had collected information enough to help her in making out a far more intricate history than theirs.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

### IN QUEST OF THE SECRET.

'**W**HAT are you poring over there, Mademoiselle? It looks like a large family Bible,' said Sir Vane. He was walking through Madame's garden to look at some wonderful flower of which La Baronne had spoken to him, and came, quite unexpectedly, upon Valerie reading busily. She looked very beautiful as she bent, in the most graceful of attitudes, over the huge book. Evidently she had not expected to see him; she looked startled and discomposed; her face flushed, and she drew the folds of her dress over the book. 'If I had unexpectedly found Mrs. Heriot studying a Bible,' he said, 'I should not have been surprised; but you—well, it is rather unexpected.'

She did not contradict him at first, but drew the folds of her dress more closely over the volume.

'I cannot help asking,' laughed Sir Vane, 'to what phase of your character this love for study belongs?'

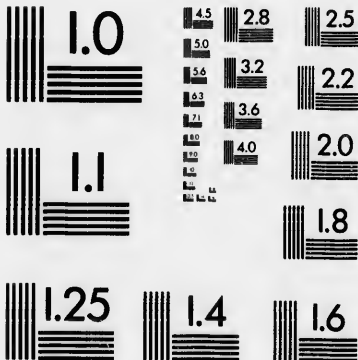
She saw that he was inclined to laugh at her, and ridicule kills love.

'I am not reading a Bible, Mr. Heriot; perhaps all the more unfortunate for me. I have a profound respect both for



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the Bible and its readers. Any little witticism you may feel inclined to make on that score will be entirely lost on me.'

'I beg your pardon, Mademoiselle; I had no intention of offending.'

'I am not offended,' she said, with a sudden change of manner, and laughing in her brightest fashion. 'You will be amused when I tell you this is only a book of old family receipts. My aunt is very proud of it; it contains four hundred receipts for puddings, and a countless number for sauces.'

'Why are you studying it? Neither puddings nor sauces are in your line,' said Sir Vane.

'No, not at all,' she said: but Madame thinks the cook does not give you variety enough, and I am searching for something quite new.'

'There is no new thing under the sun,' laughed Sir Vane; 'everything is old, and very often the oldest is the best.'

'I must not stop to listen to treason. Old wine, old books, old friends are all right; but what about old maids and old women, Mr. Heriot? You need not answer me—I must go, or my aunt will wish to know something about my absence. *Au revoir, Monsieur!*

'I wonder if it is a receipt book,' he said to himself. 'She looked very guilty, and there is certainly nothing wrong in receipts.'

While Valerie, covering the precious volume entirely, hastened with it to her room.

'What an escape!' she sighed, as she laid 'Debrett's Peerage' on the table. 'If he had seen what I was reading, he might have suspected me, I am sure. What an escape! I will keep it here for the future.'

She spent the whole of the bright summer morning in literally poring over the book. The only way in which she could be quite sure was by beginning at the first leaf, and going straight through to the last; then, if there was any truth in her suspicions, with what she knew already, she should soon know his secret. It was a tiresome task, from the table of contents and list of abbreviations to the word 'finis' at the close of the volume. She was a picture of earnest intent as she rested her white arms on the table, and bent her beautiful head over the puzzling pages. Her head was soon in a whirl!

—Dukes, Earls, Marquises ; but among them all, nothing that answered to what she wanted. Ah, yes, here was an Earl whose name was Victor Hay Carrington. The very initials, but according to the entry, he must be quite sixty. Again she found the motto, *Vincit Veritas*, belonged to several families ; the crest of the crown and olive branch she could not find. Still, she was not discouraged ; she could not wade carefully through a thick volume in a few hours, but she could return to it again and again.

At last she came to the end of this long list of peers. She had been through it carefully—she had not missed one single entry—and she was slightly disappointed ; she would like to have found out that he was an Earl at least. Then she went to the Baronetage.

‘I may have better fortune here,’ she said to herself.

It was night then ; every one else in the household was asleep ; she alone was awake, vigilant and active. The moon shone, as it does in that lovely land bright as day. She could see perfectly well to read by it ; and a very fair picture she made, leaning by the open window, the moonlight falling on her face and hair, and on the open pages of the book she held. She went through the letters A and B without any result. Her face clouded. What if it were all a myth ? She came to the letter C, and her interest deepened. If she could find a name that those initials filled. She must be right.

‘Carlyon : creation 1603 ; of Silverdale.’ The name took her fancy. She read on. ‘Sir Vane Heriot Carlyon, sixteenth baronet, born 18—; Baron of Silverdale ; seat, Garswood and Silverdale Abbey ; Lord of the Manor of Berkdale, Silverdale House, Mayfair. Arms : an eagle, supported by lions rampant. Crest : a crown and olive branch. Motto of the Carlyon family : *Vincit Veritas*—Truth Conquers.’

As she read, her eyes flashed, the breath came in hot gasps from her lips ; her hands trembled so that the book almost fell.

‘I have it,’ she cried. ‘I have found him at last.’

She was almost petrified with astonishment ; she had felt quite sure that he was not what he seemed to be, a rich English commoner, and no great account ; but she had hardly anticipated such perfect success. There could not be the least doubt of his identity.



Now, for what reason in the world had Sir Vane Heriot Carlyon laid aside his rank and title? Why did he choose to hide himself in the solitude of a Swiss chateau? Could he possibly have done anything which compelled him to leave his native land? No, that was not the reason, she felt sure; she remembered the saying of the French king, that a woman was at the bottom of everything. Then it flashed across her suddenly that he must be in exile for Agatha's sake—for Agatha.

Her face suddenly grew pale, and a light came into her eyes that was not pleasant to see. She turned to the book again and looked at the date. It was that same year, 18-- , and there was no entry of his marriage; on the contrary, it said, "Heir presumptive, Arthur Blackbury, cousin." There was no entry of a marriage. Yet Agatha, speaking the other day to her, said it was nearly three years since they were married.

How could that be? Had the marriage been a private one? Was she below him or above him in position—or—if it were possible such a dreadful thing could be—perhaps they were not married at all? She laughed at the notion—this handsome, aristocratic man, who worshipped his wife with the fondest love that could be lavished on any creature—it was quite impossible that he could have stooped to such folly with that beautiful, angelic Agatha, who seemed to belong to Heaven rather than earth. As well might she believe that the stars could fall from heaven than that one so pure and perfect could have gone wrong. In her own mind Valerie had often thought that Agatha was a little too good for this worldly world. Of course the idea was utter nonsense, *yet it grew upon her*. She could not thrust it from her mind. That fact would explain everything if it were true. There was no doubt but that he loved Agatha with his whole heart—loved her well enough to live in exile his whole life-long for her sake; that being the case, why had he not married her?

There was a flaw in her case. If he loved her well enough to give up rank, title, position, and everything for her, why had he not married? Or was it possible that this was a private marriage—one that he would, perhaps, never acknowledge? She longed to know the truth; she would have given anything she had in the world to have found it out there and then. If they had been privately married, and he dare not, for some reason

or other, let his marriage be known, then even the knowledge of the secret might be of value to her. If there had been no marriage—and her thoughts inclined that way—how could she tell what might happen? She might, in all probability, be his wife herself!

A thousand plans and schemes rushed through her brains. She would find it out—she would know whether they had been married or not, and then shape her plans accordingly. Not one word would she say to madame; it would be fatal; but she would watch and lay in wait. There were little signs and little words that must betray the truth. She laid the book aside.

‘No one must see that,’ she said to herself, ‘or I shall lay myself open to suspicion at least. Can it be possible that that quiet, fair, fond girl is Lady Carlyon? I do not think it; but it lies within the boundaries of fate that I may sometime be Lady Carlyon myself. If she is not his wife, and I can win his heart—win him to better ways; I shall do so. She can go back to her friends, and I shall be happy, for I am sure he is beginning to like me.’

She was too agitated for sleep. Little did Sir Vane think that under the same roof there was one who had followed his story, whose keen wits had looked through his disguise, and whose heart was set upon finding out the truth about the girl whom he loved and honored with all his heart. If he had known it, he would have left Bellefleurs that same hour, never to return.

Valerie lay thinking how, without attracting attention, she could ask such questions as would at least disturb their self-command.

‘I can ask more from her than from him,’ she thought, ‘and I will make my questions so general she shall suspect nothing.’ She tried Sir Vane first. As they were altogether the following day, she turned the conversation to English scenery.

‘Mr. Heriot,’ she said, ‘do you know Loamshire?’ Garswood was in the very heart of Loamshire, but Sir Vane had too much self-control.

‘Loamshire, mademoiselle?’ he repeated. ‘Certainly, I know it well; it is one of the prettiest and most fertile counties in England.’

'Is it?' she said. 'The scene of the last English novel I read in Paris was laid there. I thought the scenery must be very fine.'

'I do not think it is so fine or picturesque as either of the two neighboring counties,' said Sir Vane coolly. 'You should extend your travels still further and go to England, made-moiselle.'

The words made her heart beat.

'I hope to do so, some day,' she said; but just then she felt a little doubtful.

If all she suspected was true, he was certainly able to keep his own counsel. Not a muscle of his face moved as he answered her. The next attack must be made on Agatha, whom she was better able to manage.

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## CHAPTER XX.

"I HOLD HER DEATH-WARRANT."

'Do you believe that May marriages are unhappy?' asked Valerie, suddenly. She was with Agatha in the music-room, where the grand organ stood, and after singing together for some time they stood talking at the open bay-window, and Valerie thought it a fine opportunity for asking some of her most searching questions. 'Do you believe that May marriages are unhappy?'

'I never thought about it,' said Agatha. 'I should think not—it is the loveliest month in the year. Why should anything about it be unhappy?'

'I like weddings when there are plenty of flowers,' said Valerie. 'They seem very dull to me without. What month were you married in, Mrs. Heriot?'

Taken quite by surprise, and without time to reflect, she answered:

'In June.'

Suddenly there rose before her a vision of that scene in the wood, and her face flushed, not a common blush that came and went, but a scorching flame of fire that seemed to burn to the roots of her hair, and which was noted with supreme satisfaction by Valerie.

'In June,' she repeated, 'that is a more beautiful month than May. You were married in some grand church by a bishop, I suppose. I should like to see an English marriage very much.' She spoke in a low, musing tone, and was looking at the far off waters of the lake. 'Were you married by a bishop, Mrs. Heriot?'

'No,' was the brief reply.

And for the first time it occurred to Agatha, what would any one say who knew how she had been married? Would they think it very curious? What, for instance, would this brilliant French girl think? She fully believed in her marriage herself, but she felt now that it might seem a little curious to others.

'I thought,' said Valerie, 'that all rich people were married by bishops.'

'No, not at all; indeed, I think very few, but I know very little about it—no one less.'

'I like the form of an English wedding,' repeated Valerie. 'Of course you had a long train of bridesmaids—young and beautifully dressed?'

It was a pointed question, and Valerie looked into the young face as she asked it. Again the deepened flush.

'No,' replied Agatha, 'I had no bridesmaids. Do not talk about weddings, Valerie, I do not think them the most cheerful subject one can discuss.'

'They seem very cheerful to me,' laughed Valerie. 'Where did you go for your honey-moon, Mrs. Heriot?'

'To Paris,' replied Agatha.

And this time she spoke so frankly that Valerie saw if there had been a marriage the honey-moon was a safe subject.

'What a curious expression it is—"a honey-moon," she said, laughing. '*Lune de miel* (a month of honey), we say, but I like the English expression best; tell me about your wedding, Mrs. Heriot. I am sure it must have been a pretty one, and I must own to a great weakness in the matter of weddings. I

like to hear about them—who cried—why they cried—who laughed—who made speeches, and what they said—tell me all about it.

'No one cried at my wedding,' replied Agatha.

Then she bethought herself. How many tears must have followed it—how her father and Joan, the women and the children must have wept over her—and her face grew pale.

'No one cried!' Was there no one sorry to lose you?' 'Yes, many; but I saw no tears.'

She might have added that she saw no smiles either, but she was growing nervous and confused. It was perfectly natural that one girl should talk to another about weddings; but she knew so little what to say. If she could have given even ever so small an account—if she could have said, 'I was married in such a place—in such a church'—there would have been a story to tell. How would it sound if she told Valerie that Sir Vane had knelt down by her side and had read the marriage service over with her, and had then solemnly assured her that she was his wife—how would that sound? Valerie, of course, would not understand it, even though it were all true.

'I have nothing to tell. My marriage was, I suppose like others.'

Valerie's heart beat high with triumph. To herself she said:

'I do not believe there was any marriage at all, and if not I will be Lady Carlyon after all.'

The nervous confusion and agitation of Agatha convinced her that she was right. If she had been married legally with all proper form and ceremony, she would, of course, be able to tell when and by whom. From that moment she gave her life to the finding out of that secret, and the winning of Sir Vane's affections for herself.

Looking over one of the English daily papers, she came across the advertisement of a private inquiry office.

'The very thing for me,' she said, and that same day she wrote to John Miklevitch asking for all information concerning Sir Vane Heriot Carlyon, of Garswood, whether he was married—whether he was supposed to be paying his addresses to any one, where he was, and if his name was mixed up with scandal of any kind. She arranged the terms herself, inclosing

one-half of the sum she considered sufficient, and promised to send the other half when she had his reply. Then came a week of anxious suspense; the answer came saying that in three weeks he would be able to send every particular.

They were three weeks of great anxiety to her. She made the most of them by assiduously seeking Sir Vane, by doing her best to amuse him, to draw him into a sentimental flirtation, and she did not fail.

The answer came at last, and she vowed to herself that it was worth double the money she had spent upon it.

Sir Vane Carlyon, of Garswood, was immensely rich—twenty-eight years of age, exceedingly handsome, was not married, nor had there been any rumors of his engagement. He had had many *affaires du cœur*, and did not bear the highest reputation—more than one ruined life lay at his door. He was now on the Continent—somewhere, it was believed in Switzerland, but the whereabouts was not certain, and—he was not alone—a young and beautiful girl had left England with him—of whom nothing was known.

Valerie's face flushed, and her heart beat, with triumph, as she read this letter.

'I hold her death-warrant in my hands,' she said to herself, with a smile, 'but I must take my time.'

After a few days she wrote again, asking John Miklevitch to find out a place called Whitecroft, where Sir Vane had been visiting, and to do his best to discover whether he had been privately married there, or whether he had eloped with any one from the place. There was to be no question of expense, she said to herself. She would fling her whole fortune on the die. If she succeeded, she should be Lady Carlyon—if she failed, it would matter little enough what became of her. The answer was longer this time in coming, but when it had come, she was repaid for the waiting.

Mr. Miklevitch, finding the inquiry to be an important one, and likely to be lucrative also, had gone down to Whitecroft himself, and made all the discoveries with his own hand. It would be useless to narrate all his disguises—how he went to the rectory as a footman—how he beguiled old Joan as a fortune-teller, and after condoling with her over the faithless butcher, won her to talk of Miss Agatha, who had disappeared so wonderfully.

He found his way into Croft Abbey disguised as a groom, and from the other grooms there learnt plenty of Sir Vane. He did still more—he searched the marriage registers of all the churches in the neighborhood; he found out the exact date on which Agatha had disappeared from Whitecroft; and discovered the exact date on which they went to Paris; and he knew that (on English ground at least) there had been no time for a marriage.

He went on to say how Agatha Brooke was loved and worshipped; how her memory was shined among the poor as the memory of a saint; how they associated her with the figure on the stained-glass window; and how she had been known among them as the 'angel of the poor.' There was no house he entered where she had not taken hope, comfort, and relief; there was no man or woman who spoke of her with dry eyes.

'Not a very likely person,' he added, 'to have run away with Sir Vane.'

Nevertheless, the proofs that she had done so were incontestible. He added that among the villagers there was a certainty that she was married; that they had also a sure conviction that she would return to them some day, beautiful and good as ever, and better able to help them. But old Joan and the doctor wept over her as one that was lost and would never return. Did mademoiselle wish to know any more?

It is still an open question whether the most good or the most harm is done by detectives. They may, at times serve the most useful and honorable of purposes; again they may be used in the most disloyal fashion, and for the most dishonorable purposes. Certainly, Valerie D'Envers would never have found out Sir Vane's secret but for them. Now, at least, she held the secret in her own hands. She could stab her, slay her, do as she would with her; at one word from her the whole of the fabric would fall at once into ruins; at one word madame would rise in the righteous wrath and expel them. But such words Valerie was not likely to speak. She would wield her power as she liked, and always with the same end in view—that she should be Lady Carlyon herself.

Knowing the real purity and goodness of Agatha's character, she felt quite certain that Sir Vane had deceived her in some way over the marriage. She was too keen a reader of charac-

ter to believe for one instant that Agatha had willingly or wilfully gone wrong, or that she had been with him all this time without firmly believing herself to be his wife. She paid her that much respect quite unconsciously.


What a power it is to hold! She looked at the lovely, refined lady, clad in gorgeous dresses and costly gems by Sir Vane's desire, and thought to herself that by one word she could strip her of all this, and bring her down to the very dust; by one word she could hurl her from this, the height of her social grandeur, to the very lowest depths of shame and disgrace. Yet she was woman enough to feel sorry that another, and so peerless a woman should be sacrificed. She had a strange and complex nature; she would have done anything to achieve her ends; she would have trampled the beauty from Agatha's face, she would have tortured her; she would have slain her; yet she recognized the value of the woman whom she was about to destroy.

'I have read,' she said, to herself, 'of generals who have made a ladder of the dead bodies of soldiers to scale a fortress; I shall have to tread upon one human heart, and it must be broken for my sake.'

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## CHAPTER XXI.

'NOW I CAN BEAR MY FATE.'

NE holding a sword in the hand naturally longs to strike. There were times when Valerie had the greatest difficulty in refraining from striking the blow. The one thing that restrained her was this—she was not yet sure of Sir Vane. Many a heart, she knew, was caught at the rebound. What she really hoped for was that, when Agatha was dethroned, no matter in what fashion it happened, Sir Vane would turn to her, would seek comfort and amusement from her. Even if he did not love her so much at first, it would



not matter—that would come afterward. In the meantime she must try, more than ever she had done, to fix his attention on herself.

She knew every art in the science of flirtation. She knew when to laugh, or to look sad, when to advance, when to retreat, when to be coy, and when to be demonstrative; she understood the whole science. Hitherto she had been most amusing; she had helped them to while away many hours; she had been ready to respond to their invitations, and had seldom neglected a chance of placing herself in Sir Vane's way. Now, she did exactly the opposite. She declined most of the invitations on one pretext or another; she avoided rather than sought Sir Vane. When with them, her brilliant spirits seemed to have left her—she was silent, very often sad. When Sir Vane addressed her, she never looked at him, and she did just what she had wished to do—she piqued him. More than once he found her in her favorite seat by the marble faun, and the moment she saw him she rose hastily and went away, instead of welcoming him, as she had done before, with kindly words and bright eyes. One morning, when this happened, he hastened after her. Hearing his footsteps she quickened hers.

'If it's to be a race, I shall most surely beat you, mademoiselle!' he cried. 'I must speak to you!'

He overtook her, and held out his hand in kindly greeting to her.

'I never see you,' he said, half reproachfully. 'How is it?'

'I cannot tell,' she replied.

But the frank pleasure with which she had been wont to greet him was all gone; her eyes drooped, her face was turned from him.

'It must be my fancy,' continued Sir Vane, 'or I should feel quite sure that you avoided me purposely.'

She made no answer.

'Mademoiselle, speak to me. I beg of you. Have I done anything to displease you?'

'No,' she replied; 'you could never do that.'

'Then I am very fortunate,' he said. 'But how is it we spent such very pleasant hours together, and now we never meet?'

She was silent, and turned away her face.

Sir Vane understood that he was in for a sentimental scene, and his best plan was to go through with it. He was rather amused that she gave such evident signs of admiration for him; it pleased his vanity—showed him that he had not lost his old power over the fairer sex. A little incense burned before him was very sweet.

'I have not displeased you, and nothing has happened; then why are you not the same with us, mademoiselle?'

She raised her eyes suddenly, with one swift, sharp, metric glance into his face, then dropped them.

'How do you say that I am not the same?' she cried.

'I see for myself. When you see me in the distance, you avoid me. When Mrs. Heriot sends you a pretty little note of invitation, you find excuses always. Now, frankly, what have we done?'

'Nothing,' she replied, briefly.

'Then, why do it?'

'Can you not understand,' she said, interrupting him, 'that there are reasons one can hardly explain—hardly speak of?'

'No, I do not,' he said. 'I can imagine or understand no reason why you should avoid us.'

With equal certainty, I must add, that if *you* see no cause I shall not enlighten you.'

The accent on the *you* caught his attention. He looked in the dark, beautiful face.

'Do you not know,' she said, 'that some pleasures are too dearly purchased?'

'I do not know,' he replied, 'I have never counted the cost of a pleasure yet.'

Nor had she—of a caprice.

'You will have to count it some day,' she said.

'The day is, I hope, far distant,' he replied. 'Let me see what I can find in your words; you evidently mean that you find a pleasure in being with us, but that you have to pay a price for it; now what is that price?'

'Can you not guess?' she asked.

'I dare not guess,' he replied, in a low tone of voice.

In his heart he cared nothing for her; he thought her very brilliant and very amusing, he admired her wit and her accomplishments, but he was not the least in love with her. She

was the kind of woman who might attract his fancy for a short time, but she would never win his love ; yet he could not resist the opportunity of a sentimental flirtation.

He had thought to himself that she was evidently fond of him, and it was some time since he had had any little affair of the kind. It was no breach of truth and fidelity to Agatha, because he cared nothing for her ; at the same time, if a pretty girl *did* admire him he could not be so ungallant as to refuse to perceive it. He knew nothing of the strong passion that filled the girl's breast for him ; he did not know that she had for him the maddest love one creature could have for another ; he might have paused, might have been careful had he done so. How was he to guess that this girl, with the beautiful averted face, had mastered his secret, knew his whole story, held the death-warrant of his beloved Agatha in her hands ? All he saw was a beautiful woman who, from constant association with him, had grown to love him. He must not deal hardly with her, for, after all, it was a great compliment to him, and the flattery of it was very dear and very sweet.

'I dare not guess,' he repeated, 'but you will tell me. Do not hasten away. Surely you can give me a few minutes after being cruel to me so long. Come down this ilex grove.'

'I must not—I cannot,' she cried.

'Yes you will, you have piqued something more than my curiosity, mademoiselle—Valerie ; let me use your name. You must come ?'

He took her hand in his and led her to the shady grove.

'Who would have thought of a love adventure here,' he said to himself, 'in the solitude of Lake Lucerne ?' It reminded him of olden days, when bright eyes grew brighter and fair faces fairer for him. The old instinct, dulled by his great love for Agatha, woke within him.

'Now you shall tell me all about it,' he said—'why you avoid me. What is the cost of the pleasure of being with us ?—what is the price you pay for it ?'

She was in powerful hands now—there was no escape for her. She was wily—he was more wily still. He wanted to know that he had not lost his old power over women's hearts, and here was an instance.

He won it from her at last—the acknowledgement that she had learned to care for him—that being with him so much,

and finding him so different to other men, she had grown to care a little too much for him. She spoke with lowered eyelids—a dangerous light gleaming there when they were raised. She spoke with a suppressed passion that suited her dark, brilliant beauty. He did not care for her in the least, but it was sweet incense to his vanity. It was amusement to him—it was death to her. She was determined to know one truth, little dreaming that the man before her thought truth quite superfluous where women were concerned, and never used it.

'It seems a curious question to ask,' she said, mournfully; 'but as we have been talking confidentially, I should like to ask it.'

'Ask what you will,' he replied; 'it must always be a pleasure to me to answer any question of yours.'

'You will, perhaps, soon be far away from here,' she continued sadly, 'and you will look on the time spent here as a dream—a few words more or less will matter nothing to you then, but they will matter much to me. Tell me this—if—if years ago—you had met me—when—when you were quite free—should you have loved me?'

What did a falsehood more or less matter in a case like this? He was really touched by the quivering lips and faltering voice. He knew in his heart he should never have loved her. He had flirted with scores of such women, and had forgotten even their names—but why tell her so?

'Can you doubt it?' he whispered, tenderly. 'So beautiful, so gifted, so loving as you are—can you doubt me?'

That whisper drove her mad, and that falsehood sealed his fate. She looked up at him, and the expression of her face haunted him for long afterward.

'Is that true?' she repeated. 'Had you been free when you met me—you would have—have—loved me? Is it true?'

He raised her hand to his lips.

'It is quite true,' he replied.

She grew deadly pale, her heart beating so quickly she could hardly breathe; her senses grew dizzy with her triumph—she should soon be free—his love should soon be hers. One word from her lips and his chains would fall from him. She stood pale, dazed, and humiliated by the completeness of her victory.

'I—I shall live on those words,' she replied.

And he thought to himself, 'What a tragedy queen she is.'

'One more question,' she said: 'let me whisper it to you; bend that handsome head of yours down to me. What a proud head it is.'

He bent down until his brown curls touched her face.

'What is it?' he said.

'Tell me one thing more. You say that if you had met me before—when you were quite free—you would have cared for me?'

He made no reply—only gave her hand a warmer clasp; in sooth he was growing a little tired of the scene. Love is delightful, but flirtation is very monotonous. It was time he was back with Agatha—fair, sweet Agatha—who would have died a hundred deaths rather than have done as Valerie was doing now.

'Tell me,' she repeated, 'would you, supposing in the future you were free and met me, should you care for me then?'

'Of course I should,' he replied.

And she was too much agitated herself to notice how carelessly he spoke.

'I thank you,' she said, gently; 'now I can bear my fate whatever it may be. These few words will comfort me all my life-long.'

She trembled with the consciousness of her victory; but now it was time to leave him. She held out her hands to him.

'This is good-by,' she said. 'After what has passed we can never meet as friends—we must be strangers; but I shall be happier all my life for knowing that you would have loved me if you could. Good-by.'

She was gone before he could speak another word; and it was well for her that she did not see the smile on his lips as she disappeared.

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CHAPTER XXII.

'REAL LOVE BEGINS ON EARTH AND ENDS IN HEAVEN.'



ALERIE D'ENVERS stood alone in her room, her face flushed, her eyes bright with victory; her heart beating, every pulse thrilling, every nerve strained to its utmost tension. What an easy victory it was after all—he would love her if he were free. He should soon be free! In her madness she never stopped to think that the very fact of his declaring himself not free in reality proved that he was not so; she did not bethink herself that if her suspicions were correct, and he was not married to Agatha, he was free that moment, then and there, to make her an offer if he wished to do so. Like many other clever people, she overreached herself; in the delirium of her mad love, of her triumph, of her wild hopes for the future, she overlooked the most practical and sensible view of the case.

She had but one longing now, and it was to hurl Agatha from her throne and take her place. She was just a little puzzled how to begin. She held the power and the proofs in her own hands, but they would require delicate management. She could not go to Agatha, for instance, and tell her the story; that would most certainly be a blunder. She must not, at present at least, say one word to madame, who would be overcome with horror at the bare idea of such iniquity. To go to Sir Vane himself would, of course, be absurd; he knew his own secret. It was the greatest puzzle she had ever had.

She must strike at Agatha, if she struck at all. She felt a sure conviction that the girl had been deceived in some way, but in what way she could not imagine. She knew enough of Agatha to be quite sure that she was no hypocrite; the sweet, spiritual character was quite transparent to her. She had watched her closely, and was sure of her freedom from all knowledge of guilt.

How often she had found her, in the early morning and the dewy night, with her pretty gilt prayer-book in her hands; how often she had seen her in the pretty little church by the lake, kneeling there when she believed herself unseen; how often, in the twilight, had she found her seated by the organ, singing, with her soul on her lips, some of those grand old melodies. She remembered, too, the tender, delicate purity of the girl's whole life. She had never heard a light word on her lips, she had never seen the faintest symptom of levity; she was always sweet, serene, calm, and angelic. Then she remembered also her wonderful charity to the poor; for even there, in the solitude of the chateau, Agatha found out some who wanted help and relief.

Thinking over these things, and relying a great deal upon her knowledge of human nature, Valerie came to the conclusion that Agatha had, in some way or other, been deceived by Sir Vane; that he had made her believe that she was his wife, and that she was not happy in that belief. She must undo that belief, and let her know what her proper place was. It would in all probability, break her heart; but then some one's heart must be broken—as well Agatha's as another's. She was the victim and must suffer, as victims always do. She was just a little sorry for her; but every woman should know how to take care of herself, and if Agatha had not done so, the fault was her own, and she must take the consequences.

She decided that she would not be in a hurry. It was better to wait a few days longer than to act too precipitately; and during those few days, she decided that she would say as little as possible to Sir Vane, and as much as possible to Agatha.

It so happened that the day after this, some friends of madame's, the Count and Countess Fleshen, came to spend a day with her, and madame, thinking to give pleasure, to her English lodgers, invited them to dine with them.

The countess herself was a pretty little blonde woman, very vivacious, animated, and fond of gossip. The count just the reverse—tall, dark, silent, yet evidently delighting in the social talent of his wife.

Agatha looked supremely beautiful that day. She wore a dinner dress of white brocade, with a suite of superb pearls. Valerie wore her most bewitching costume of pale amber, with

Marechal Niel roses in her dark hair and on her white breast. The countess admired Agatha the most, but liked Valerie the best. She was more of her world than the refined, spiritual girl, who looked as though she only wanted wings to make her an angel. The countess and Valerie understood each other by instinct; the countess and Agatha rather avoided each other by instinct.

It was a very pleasant party, and madame gave them a most *recherche* dinner. The dessert was placed out in the garden, under the shadow of tall trees with great spreading boughs. Very pretty and picturesque it looked, the dishes filled with ripe, luscious fruit; the glasses, with their long, slender stems: the sparkling wine, the rare flowers, and the beautiful women.

The countess warmed to her task. There were several very piquant scandals floating about concerning those in high places. She related one or two, which were received with marked admiration by mademoiselle and suppressed amusement by Sir Vane.

At length came one less comical and more tragical than the rest. It was of the beautiful young Princess D—. It was well known that she had loved with her whole heart a distant cousin of hers who was in the army; but her parents had wished that she should marry the Grand Duke Reinberg, whom she disliked as much as she loved the other. All Europe was sorry for the beautiful young princess, who was compelled to do what she was told, and marry the old grand duke. That which might have been foreseen happened—in time the beautiful princess hated her lot, and found it unbearable. The grand duke became a jealous tyrant, the young lover appeared upon the scene, and she ran away with him, to the sorrow of all Europe.

It would be all right in time, the friends of the princess said; the duke would, of course, obtain a divorce, and then she could marry the old love.

It was a sorry plight at the best, but she had that one chance of redeeming herself, if indeed there was any redemption. But the wily old duke had laughed to himself. Did they think to manage him so cleverly? Not if he lived for fifty years longer would he seek a divorce. 'As the tree falls so it must lie'—as his wife had chosen to disgrace herself, she should die as she



lived—no divorce should be won from him. Then her friends had tried to persuade her to leave the young lover, and try to make some kind of compromise with the old duke, which she stoutly refused. Then they avowed an intention of taking her from him by force. The result of it all was that the beautiful young princess poisoned herself, and in the very height of her beauty and youth, had been buried forever from the sight of men.

They listened eagerly. It was a tragedy—but then, as the count suggested, it would have been more complete had the young lover killed himself as well. There was a languid smile for what was evidently intended as a witticism, and every one present seemed to draw a great moral lesson from the anecdote. Agatha's fair face had grown very pale; she had never heard such a story before.

Sir Vane had done her the greatest wrong that could be done, but he had, at the same time, evinced the greatest respect for her innocence and simplicity; he had never allowed the scandal or gossip of the world to come near her, and he looked round now most uncomfortably; he felt quite sure that it was the first story of the kind she had heard. Her eyes were dark with horror, all her smiles and brightness died. She hardly knew the meaning of the word divorce; in Whitecroft it was unknown; husbands and wives loved each other there, and were quite content to live together, loving each other in primitive fashion until they died; such a thing as divorce was not known, and yet here they talked of it as if it were an everyday event.

The white, scared face made Sir Vane feel very uncomfortable. He rose and invited the count to take a cigar with him. The two gentlemen walked toward the lake, the countess and madame had mutual confidences to make, the two girls, Agatha and Valerie, wandered to where the marble faun stood with the eternal smile on his young face.

'You look pale and tired, Mrs. Heriot,' said Valerie, glancing at the pale, thoughtful face and shadowed eyes.

'I am not tired, but, Valerie, is that horrible story true, do you think?'

'Which of them?' asked Valerie, calmly.

She knew what was coming, and she was ready to make the most of her opportunity.

'That terrible story about the young princess who poisoned herself,' replied Agatha.

'Yes, I should say it is perfectly true. I remember something of it when I was in Paris. Why need you look so white and frightened about it?'

'It seems so horrible,' she replied, 'such a foul mass of sin, and they talked about it as quite a common event. It seems to me a horrible crime to marry without love—a perjury.'

'What would you think then of those who love and do not marry?' asked Valerie.

'Love and not marry,' repeated Agatha, 'that could never be; no one would be so foolish as to love when they could not marry.'

'You do not know much of life, Mrs. Heriot,' said Valerie, with a smile. 'One might think you had always lived in a church.'

'I know little enough of that kind of life,' said Agatha. 'I have lived among people who called sin sin, but I have never heard such things as these.'

'You do not know much, then,' said Valerie.

'I am glad I do not. It seems to me, Valerie, that these people call any and everything by the name of love.'

'What do you call love?' asked Valerie.

A sudden light came into the pale face; a beautiful gleam shone in the violet eyes.

'Oh, Valerie, there is but one kind of love—there could not be more. I believe in the love that begins on earth and ends in Heaven.'

'With marriage as an intermediate station,' laughed Valerie.

'I have always thought of love and marriage as one,' she replied.

And then Valerie laughed to herself. Of a certainty this fair, spiritual girl had been cruelly and wilfully deceived; and she tried to make herself believe that it was her duty to open the eyes so long blinded to the truth.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

## DISTILLING THE POISON.

**V**ALERIE was for some days quite at a loss how to use her power—it seemed almost useless to her. She had given herself infinite trouble and expense to learn Sir Vane's true history, and now that she did know it, now that she had it by heart, it seemed to her of no avail. Her plan was to separate them, and to put herself in Agatha's place. He would not dare to trifle with her—she was Mademoiselle D'Envers, belonging to a good old French family; she had been to the court-balls, and more than once at the Tuileries: the beautiful empress, then in the very zenith of her beauty and popularity, had spoken to her several times, and the Emperor had praised her. Indeed, had there been any way of pushing her fortune at court, she felt that she should have made a great success there. Even an English baronet would not dare trifle with her. A country girl—a doctor's daughter—was a very different person from a descendant of the old line of D'Envers.

She was not afraid that he would trifle with her; to win her heart was very different from winning the heart of an obscure girl like Agatha Brooke; but she felt that all her skill would be needed. If she made the least mistake her plans would all fail; the elaborate structure she had raised would all fall to the ground. She must use such cautious skill as would insure her success when Agatha was dethroned. The difficulty would be to part them. She felt quite sure now in her own mind that there had been no proper, legal marriage—that, in some way best known to himself—Sir Vane had deceived her. She saw plainly enough that Agatha honestly and in good faith believed herself to be his wife. She must part them without drawing down his anger upon herself, or running the risk of losing him afterward. There was one great danger of which she could foresee, and it was this: If any suspicions came to Agatha that

she had been wronged, she would most probably go to Sir Vane, with sobs and tears, and he, loving her as he certainly did, would, perhaps, offer to make her his wife in earnest; then Valerie's hopes were all in vain. She must prevent that: and a plan shaped itself in her mind by which she could let Agatha know that she had possession of her secret without saying anything to Sir Vane. It would be easy, safe and sure.

It was worthy of her—worthy of the French stage, and showed, as her inquiries had done, a genius for intrigue that was almost unsurpassed. She could imitate handwriting, and what she proposed to herself to do was this: She would write an anonymous letter and address it to herself. She would send it to Paris to one of her friends, who would post it to her addressed to Mademoiselle D'Envers, Chateau Bellefleurs, Lucerne, Switzerland, and this letter should contain the story. She would read it to Agatha, and then let her do as she thought best. She was not afraid of letting Sir Vane know that she had received such a letter; he could not be angry at her showing it to Agatha, it would seem only natural that she should do so, as she could not be supposed to show it to him.

If she had been mistaken, and there had been a real marriage, then all she had to do was to denounce the writer of such a letter, and profess the utmost contempt for it. If there was truth in it, she had but to profess sympathy! in any case she was quite safe, for no one could ever suspect her of writing such a letter. No one knew she hated Agatha, loved Sir Vane, or interested herself at all in their affairs. They would never suspect her. She quite approved of her plan.

'I am developing quite a genius,' she said to herself, with a well-pleased smile. 'I believe I could write a drama for the stage. After all it is quite true that men and women are only puppets, and one can pull the strings at one's pleasure.'

She was walking on the terrace as she matured this plan of hers, and suddenly over the roses came a sweet voice, crying: 'Valerie! Valerie!'

She looked round. Agatha was walking towards her, and at the sight of that fair, innocent face something like remorse smote her; how could she torture one so gentle, so sweet and fair? When a man resolves upon torture he is cruel enough, but when a woman makes such a resolution she is a thousand

times more cruel. Valerie stood still to watch the beautiful girl coming toward her.

'Why should I mind?' she asked herself. 'Why should I hold my hand because she must suffer? When a great general wants to conquer a kingdom, he does not stop to count the slain, to count the mangled bodies, the widows' tears, the broken hearts; he does not stop to speak of the torture, the agony, the pain! he goes on to victory; and so must I. I must not stop to speak of the tears she will shed, of the sobs and sighs that will rend her fair form, of the shame that will burn and scorch her fair life. I must go on to victory.'

She went to meet Agatha with a smile on her lips—she who had deadly hate against her in her heart, who had planned her ruin—went to her, folded her arms round her, kissed her face, spoke loving words to her.

'You look fresh as the morning itself, Mrs. Heriot,' she said. 'Were you calling me?'

'Yes. Madame says that your head was uncovered, and felt anxious about it. I promised to tell you.'

'Poor aunty; she has always shown more anxiety over my head than my heart,' laughed Valerie. 'You English ladies think more of your hearts than your heads.'

'It is to be hoped so,' said Agatha.

Valerie's eyes were fixed on her with admiration—the tall, graceful figure in the white dress: the fair flower-like face; the golden hair; the light of the violet eyes.

'It is true,' she said to herself. 'she is more like an angel than a woman. She looks fair enough, and ethereal enough, if she had wings to fly.'

Even while she had her arms round Agatha's waist, while she caressed her and talked to her, she was wondering what the fair face would be like when she knew the truth; how the eyes would lose their light, and the lips their smile.

'It would most probably kill her,' she said to herself; and the merciful thing will be for her to die. I do not see what is to become of her, if she lives.

When a woman acts the part of Judas, she does it far more thoroughly than a man.

The hand that was to deal Agatha her death-blow, touched lightly the golden hair.

'I know ladies,' said Valerie, 'who would give all they have on earth for such hair as this.'

'If you gave everything for it, of what use would it be?' asked Agatha.

'You do not know the value of beauty,' said Valerie. 'Wait until you go out into the world, Mrs. Heriot, and then you will see what is the value of hair like yours. Pale, pure gold, is thought almost as much of as a crown. At one of the balls I went to at the Tuileries, there was an English woman with just such hair, and the whole court was infatuated with her. She was the rage for many weeks.'

'I would rather hide my hair under a cap than to be the "rage" anywhere,' said Agatha.

'You will not always think so,' laughed Valerie. 'You have the glamor of love in you now; but the time must come when that will fade, even ever so little, and you will want to see the world you think so little of.'

'I have my world with me,' said Agatha, with a sigh of content.

Valerie's brilliant face paled a little.

'You mean Mr. Heriot—he is your world. Do you think any man ever went on loving all his life!'

'I should hope so,' said Agatha, with a happy laugh. 'I know one who will.'

'It is happy for you to think so,' said Valerie. 'I think most men tire of love in a very short time—in one, two or three years, as the case may be. You remember the lines:

'Man's love is of man's life a thing apart:  
'Tis woman's whole existence.'

'I do not believe them,' replied Agatha; and when it is the case, I should think there is some fault in the object beloved.'

'It is the nature of a man to tire soon of one object,' said Valerie.

'I know to the contrary,' said Agatha, with a happy smile.

Valerie laughed. She did not want her companion to see the poison underlying her words.

'I think,' she continued, 'that women are more selfish in their love than men. If a man marries a woman for love, he raises her to his level, and gives her his name and position. If

a woman marries for love, she wants her husband to give up the whole world for her, and never is so happy as when she has taken him from everything useful and noble in the world, and keeps him all to herself.'

But Agatha was too simple and too unconscious to take the words to herself. The sunny light and laughter did not die from her face as it would have done had she understood the sting that Valerie intended to convey.

'I often wonder--although you will say I have no right to wonder--how it is you can allow Mr. Heriot to give all his life to you as he does.'

'Why should I not?' asked Agatha, with a happy smile.

'The reason seems to me plain. He is so clever, so gifted. What a statesman he would make; what an eloquent speaker; what a polished orator; and now he is lost to the world.'

'He is happy,' said Agatha; and her rival had no reply.

'People look at things so differently,' said Valerie. 'A retreat for a few weeks or a few months in a quiet place like this is excellent, but if I were in your place, I should urge my husband back into the world, to take up a position and make the best of his life. I should be ambitious for him. Now, you, on the contrary, enjoy the quiet of an existence like this.'

For the first time the fair face was troubled, and a cloud came over it. Could it be possible, she asked herself, that her love was selfish--by acceding to his wish to live here in this beautiful solitude she was doing him an injury, marring the usefulness of his life? Valerie's keen eyes noted with delight the shadow--the first she had seen--on that sweet face. He pleased himself; it was not she, Agatha, who had asked him to come here. He had told her that he was tired of the brilliant world, tired of noise and gayety and fashion, that he longed for quiet, for rest, and love. And then it occurred to her how much was in his life of which she knew nothing--when he had lived in the great cities--when he had travelled--he never spoke to her of it, but seemed to live entirely in the present.

Was she selfish in loving him so well--in making life so happy to him that he was content to live in this quiet place and never spoke of returning to the world at all? Her troubled eyes sought Valerie's face, but she was too proud, too

delicate to discuss such a question with her. If ever she spoke of it at all it would be with her husband. Valerie saw that she had gone far enough.

'How foolish I am to ramble on in this fashion,' she said, 'but sometimes, when I see Mr. Heriot, I think what a grand statesman or officer he would make; he has an air of command such as you see in fine men—but then, of course, he knows best. Now I will make my aunt happy by going in search of a garden hat.'

But she had troubled, for the first time, the course of the happy life which had been untroubled until now.

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#### CHAPTER XXIV.

##### THE COQUETTE'S ADVANCES.

VALERIE spent many anxious hours over the composition of that letter; one word too little, would make it ineffectual, one word too much would be fatal. She brought all her wit, talent, skill, and ingenuity to bear upon it, and when it was finished she said to herself that it was inimitable, perfect of the kind. She sent it to one of her gay, careless friends in Paris—a lady who, gay and careless as she was, would have burned her fingers off rather than have posted such a thing. Valerie made her believe that it was a corrected bill which she was obliged to show to her aunt. The lady posted it, and never thought of it again. Valerie thought to herself that before it came it would be as well if she could make sure of Sir Vane's real intentions toward her—whether, if he were free, he would really marry her. If he did not care for her sufficiently for that, she need not take any further trouble. It was useless for her to set him free for another.

Sir Vane was not averse to the little sentimental scenes; they amused him while they lasted, and he laughed at the recollection of them. As for ever caring about Valerie, she was



the very last kind of woman whom he liked or tolerated—a tiresome coquette; he had flirted with hundreds, and valued them at their worth.

There could be no greater contrast than between his fair, sweet Agatha and this brilliant, girlish creature; still she amused him, and men have lived who enjoyed even the physical torture of their kind. If any one had told Sir Vane that this queen of flirts had conceived a violent passion for him, he would have laughed the idea to scorn; grand passions did not, according to his theory, belong to that class.

If ever he thought of Valerie's future at all, it was with an amused smile. She would probably marry some old marquis with a string of titles and an unpronounceable name, a great amount of money and large estates; he would give her costly dresses and magnificent jewels—would find her good carriages, and, that great consideration, an opera-box.

He laughed to think what a belle she would be, and how she would flirt with the gay cavaliers in Paris to her heart's content, while the marquis rested and slept. He had known hundreds of such women; they were very beautiful, very amusing, but as for love—bah! what had they to do with it? Had any one told him that she could part him from Agatha and take Agatha's place, he would have laughed the idea to scorn. He was not tired of her yet, and he wondered at himself. In all his life he had never been constant to any one for half so long; in fact, he loved her better than he had done when he persuaded her to run away with him.

Every man has one great love in his life, and this was Sir Vane's. The chances are all if he had been compelled to choose between leaving her forever and marrying her, he would have married her at once. If they had lived in the world in the ordinary fashion, if they had mixed in society, had been able to vary their lives, even ever so little, the chances are that his love would have increased. It was a great proof of its strength that it had borne the strain and tension of solitude. And Valerie thought that she could part a man like this from the woman he loved!

All were fish that came to his net, and when on this lovely day he met Valerie out in the beautiful sunlit grounds, where he had gone to enjoy a cigar, he was by no means averse to a

little amusement. If she liked to spend her time in telling him how she admired him, and in intimating how much she loved him, it did not hurt him, and it amused her. He could have laughed at each little manœuvre—he knew them by heart years ago.

He never dreamed that she was serious, that her own infatuation was so great she had begun to believe in his.

She met him with a coy, sweet smile, and by the expression of her face he knew that he was in for a sentimental scene. She made a step backward, as though she would retire, but Sir Vane held out his hand in greeting.

'Good morning, mademoiselle, he said, in his cheery, genial tone. 'You have brought the sunshine with you.'

But that was not the mood in which she expected to find him, or in which she wanted him.

Dare she venture on one word against Agatha, to see how he would take it?

'It is rather surprising to see you alone,' she said. 'Mrs. Heriot is generally on guard.'

'She gave him the benefit of one glance from those dark eyes—a glance which should have gone to his heart and made strange havoc there; but it failed, and fell quite harmless.

'I am glad you think Mrs. Heriot cares so much for me,' he said. It is very nice to be guarded, as you call it, by a beautiful lady.'

'Still,' she said, pleasantly, 'it would be a treat to see you sometimes alone.'

'Would it? Then I must manage it,' he said.

And the girl, so clever in all other things, had not the sense to see that he was laughing at her.

'Let us walk as far as the fountain,' she said. 'How beautiful the lake is this morning; the water is quite clear and deep-blue.'

'I wish Mrs. Heriot would come out; she loves the lake when it is in that golden blue light,' he said hastily.'

'Oh, happy Mrs. Heriot!' said Valerie. How delightful it must be to be thought about and watched over every minute. I envy her.'

Sir Vane laughed a hearty, genuine laugh, in which there was not one shade of sentiment,

'Some day some one will envy you,' he said, 'and some one will watch over you.'

She shook her beautiful head with the most bewitching air of doubt.

'I am quite sure about it. Do you know if I had my choice now in life, what I should be?'

'I cannot guess,' he replied.

'Your secretary,' she said. 'I would choose that rather than any other lot on earth. I should see you every day then, and you would be obliged to talk to me.'

'Are those two such elements of delight?' he asked thinking to himself how weak and foolish women were—all but Agatha.

'They form my notion of delight?' she said, 'I should like to be your secretary. I should like to write your letters, discuss all your affairs with you. But one's life is mapped out; no one can choose for him or herself. That would be my choice if I could make one,' she said.

'I ought to be very much flattered,' he said.

'I would rather that you were touched than flattered,' she replied, and her voice was so earnest and tender, so full of music, that he was really touched.

He looked at the beautiful, brilliant face with a sensation of wonder that she cared for him. Of course he was grateful; what man is not grateful, touched, and flattered by the love or homage of a beautiful woman?

Sir Vane was no exception; they had reached the beautiful fountain where the marble faun stood in all its eternal beauty.

'I shall always love this spot,' she said, as she sank languidly on the garden seat, placed among the myrtle trees. 'It was here that I first talked to you,' she said; 'that we had our first real conversation.' I shall always like this better than any other place about Bellefleurs.'

'You are very good to think so much of me,' he said; and the light in his eyes grew warmer as he looked at her.

What a beautiful picture she made; the myrtle thus formed a background; the fountain threw its rippling waters high in the air; the marble faun stood calm and serene in all its grandeur. She sat there in an attitude which might have been copied from Cleopatra; it was so full of grace this beautiful

face, with a look of consciousness; dark eyes that drooped from his, and long lashes that swept the dainty cheek. She wore a picturesque morning dress, with a bunch of fresh, fair roses at her belt, and a man might have gone far before he could find a lovelier picture.

'What a difference meeting you has made in my life,' she said, 'How little when I came home did I anticipate anything of the kind. I often asked myself whether it has been for good or for evil.'

'How can you be so cruel, Valerie?' he asked: the dulcet tones of that low voice influenced him insensibly.

'It is you,' she interrupted, 'who are cruel, and not I.'

'Why should knowing me bring you harm?' he asked.

She raised those dark eyes of hers with a gleam of fire, and looked at him long and steadily.

'Do you not know?' she said. 'Can you not guess? It has been the one happiness of my life to meet you and know you, but the pleasure has become too dear to me. What shall I do in the years in which I shall see you no more?'

'They will not come yet,' he said. 'I have no thought of leaving Bellefleurs.'

'Perhaps not, just now,' she said: 'but yours is not a life to spend in this fashion—all your energy, fire, action dying. You will not care for it much longer.'

'It does not follow of necessity that because I leave Bellefleurs I leave you,' he said half-laughingly.

Before he had time to finish his sentence, she had caught one of his hands between her own, and had covered it with passionate kisses and tears.

'How happy you make me,' she said: 'I was afraid that when you once left Bellefleurs I should drop out of your life.'

She had roused him to something like enthusiasm by her honeyed words and carressing manner. She bent her beautiful head down to his, until the odor of the flowers she wore reached him, and spoke to him.

'You made me very happy the other day,' she said gently. 'You told me—and the words were sweetest music to me—you told me that if you had met me when you were free, you might have loved me.'

'Did I?' said Sir Vane. He did not even remember the words, but she thought he perhaps questioned their wisdom

'I do not expect to have very much happiness in this world,' he said, gently, 'but if you would tell me that, and assure me that it is true, I would not ask greater happiness. If we had met three years ago, should you have loved me?'

Her voice seemed to die away in liquid music, and he was only human, very weak, and severely tried.

'You need not doubt it,' he said. 'I should certainly have loved you.'

But he did not add that it would have been with a light love, and that he would soon have ridden away.

It is wonderful how people can at times blind themselves, but there is no creature on earth so blind as the woman who loves a man who, in his turn, is indifferent to her. Valerie was quite blind; she judged Sir Vane by herself; she thought he must have grown tired of Agatha, however much he might love her.

'I shall cherish the memory of those words,' she said, 'and some day I may remind you of them.'

But in her blindness she overlooked this fact—that if he loved her, and had any thought of marrying her, he had nothing to do but put Agatha away from him.

The little scene ended entirely to her satisfaction, and Sir Vane laughed heartily when he remembered it.

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## CHAPTER XXV.

### SIR VANE'S UNEASINESS.

VALERIE saw her way quite clearly now. Her passion had completely blinded her. She made herself believe that Sir Vane cared as much for her as she did for him, and that, if he were free from what was, after all, an incumbrance, it would not be long before he asked her to be his wife. She would not look the inconsistencies of the matter in the face. She considered herself much more beautiful, more bril-

liant, more gifted in every way than Agatha; more like himself a great deal. Therefore, it seemed quite natural to her that he should prefer her and love her best. She did not even understand the charm of such a character as Agatha's; it was lost upon her. She drew up her superb figure to its full height, as she said to herself:

'I shall make a better Lady Carlyon than that fair-faced dove, who has not three ideas outside her church and her Bible. She is not fitted to be the mistress of Garswood—I am.'

And from that moment she thought of nothing else.

A bright morning dawned; the sky was blue, with a few lovely white clouds floating over it. So fair a day had seldom gladdened the beautiful earth.

To Agatha it was like a smile from Heaven. Her heart went back to the beautiful fields and meadows, the lovely hanging woods and clear streams at home. She wondered how all her dear old friends were (the children whom she had cared for and tended would be grown up), and her father—the dear, absent-minded father; her eyes filled with tears as she thought of him—this fair, sunlit morning had taken her back to him and her old home. She should see them again, she had no fear of that. When this pleasant dream of theirs was broken, and Sir Vane had to return to the realities of life, he would take her home she felt sure, and when her father saw how happy she was he would forgive her reticence. She wrote to him at intervals, and her letters were forwarded through Sir Vane's bankers. She did not understand how or why this morning she could not take her thoughts from Whitecroft. The Lake of Lucerne was beautiful enough, but it lacked the clouds of white blossom that made home so fair. Afterward she knew that it was a singular coincidence that, on that day above all other days, her heart and thoughts should have gone back to the dear old home and the gray church.

She dressed herself with unusual care and elegance—she felt that she must be in accordance with the day, bright and fair. She took out, poor child, a morning-dress reserved for special occasions—a beautiful white Indian muslin, cut after some quaint artistic fashion, showing the graceful curves and lines of the beautiful figure to the greatest advantage; the luxuriant

golden hair—lovely enough in itself to have made a plain woman beautiful—was brushed back from the white brow, and fastened with a snood of blue ribbon. She gathered from the casement window a deep-crimson rose, and fastened it in the bodice of her dress; and she looked the very embodiment of all that was most lovely, pure, and angelical. No wonder that Sir Vane kissed her as though he could never let her go again.

'You are brighter than the morning Agatha,' he said, 'and you are the loveliest girl. How proud I am of my darling! It seems to me that you grow more beautiful every day, and that I should have thought impossible.'

'Proud of me!' she said. 'Ah, Vane, I do not want you to be proud of me—only love me, that is all; I want nothing but love.'

'I could not love you more than I do, Agatha,' he replied.

He drew her to his heart, and caressed the golden hair; his voice was full of emotion. She had never been so dear to him before.

Just at that moment he wished that he had married her, and bound her to him for ever. And there came to him a conviction that if she knew how he had deceived her, and that if he wanted to atone to her by marriage, she would refuse him.

Looking at her in the morning light, so fair, with so much of the light of Heaven in her face, he realized the purity and spirituality of her nature, and he knew that she would never forgive such a sin as he had committed against her. He comforted himself by saying in the depth of his heart that the world would never know it. He felt that he would rather slay her with his own hand than that she should ever know the truth. She would never forgive him. He had learned, during these months, to understand and appreciate the beautiful purity and simplicity of her character, which made her seem akin to the angels.

Thank Heaven she would never know anything about it. He had thought of her future, and he had resolved, whenever he returned to England, he would take her and find her a pretty house in some remote out of the way place, where he could often go to see her, and she would never know. As he kissed the white eyelids and red lips he vowed to himself over and over again that she should never know. Better plunge a knife

in the soft, white breast, than let her know what she had lost and what she was : all these thoughts passed through his mind as he caressed her.

'How you spoil me, Vane,' she said, arranging with her white fingers the rumples of golden hair. 'No matter what pains I take with my hair,' she added, laughingly, 'you will disarrange it all.'

'You should not have such beautiful hair,' he said. 'This morning, in the sunlight, it looks—well, I am at a loss for a comparison. I know nothing that it looks like. There is the bell for breakfast, darling, come in.'

In some strange way, her thoughts would go home that morning, when she entered the saloon where the daintily appointed table groaned under the weight of ripe, luscious fruit, and homely luxuries. Sir Vane startled her by an exclamation as he took up one of his letters.

'I was just going to ask you, Agatha, what we should do with ourselves to-day.'

'Row to one of the islands, and take our books,' she answered.

'That is just what I should have liked to do ; but unfortunately, if this letter be true, I must go to Lucerne ; there is some mistake about a letter of credit at the bank, and I must attend to it at once. Will you go with me, Agatha ?'

It is possible that the whole course of her life might have been altered had she done so. The great events of most people's lives turn on trifles.

'I think not,' she said. 'Madame is returning the box of books, and I should like to look through them again. I was much interested in that last story of Victor Hugo's, and I should like to finish it. I meant to take it to the island.'

'Then I will start at once,' he said, 'and return as quickly as possible. I do not like leaving you alone through this bright, sunny day.'

'I shall not be alone, Vane. I shall be with Victor Hugo.'

'And mademoiselle, you can ask her to be with you,' said Sir Vane, 'if you feel dull.'

'I shall not be dull, said Agatha. I shall go to your favorite place on the terrace, read my book, and think of you, Vane.'

A strange unwillingness to leave her came over him ; a fore-



boding or presentiment of evil, such as he had never known before.

'I wish you were going with me, Agatha,' he said, 'I shall not leave you again.'

She raised her face to his, with a loving, beautiful smile.

'You speak as though you were going on a long journey, instead of a few miles,' she said; and his own sense of uneasiness increased.

Yet there could be no reason for it. He was only leaving her for a few hours, and in perfect safety.

'Can I bring you anything from Lucerne, Agatha!' said Sir Vane.

'No,' she replied. 'The only thing I care to have from Lucerne will be yourself.'

Yet he did not like leaving her. He made one excuse after another, until at last she rallied him.

'I believe you are trifling, Vane, and do not want to go,' she said, laughingly.

He took her in his arms, and kissed her with passionate love.

'You are right. I do not like leaving you, sweet Agatha; since I have thought of it, a terrible sense of depression has come over me. What should I do if I lost you some day and never found you again?'

'That is not likely,' she replied. 'Where you are I *must* be; we could never lose each other.'

'You would never let any one take you from me, would you, Agatha?'

'How could it be, when I am your wife, Vane? Nothing but death could part us.'

'You would never let anything else, would you, Agatha? Promise me now that nothing in this world shall ever come between us?'

'I promise,' she said.

'Seal it with a kiss, Agatha,' he said, impetuously; and she did as he said.

'I shall return by six this evening,' he said. 'You will be on the terrace to meet me?'

'Most assuredly I will,' she replied.

'Then good bye, Agatha: I must go or I shall be late.'

Yet, before he had taken many steps, he was back again.

'Agatha,' he cried, in that loving, impetuous fashion of his, 'are you quite sure that you are quite well?'

She laughed aloud, though she was touched with his anxiety.

'I am perfectly well, Vane, and perfectly happy, she replied.

'I wonder,' he said, 'what gives me this strange feeling about you—a restless, craving anxiety that nothing can allay?'

'It is nothing but nervous anxiety, Vane,' she said. 'I often have it, but I never take any notice of it.'

'I positively dread going away,' said Sir Vane. 'I think I will lose the money and let the matter pass; it is a mistake of my agents, I suppose.

'Indeed, you need not do that. But there is no need for anxiety; and I will not let you give way to it.

'You are right,' he said. 'It is all nonsense, after all. Now, put your arms around my neck and tell me that you love me.'

'There is no need,' she said, 'You know that I love you.'

Yet she kissed him, and did as he wished; and then, little dreaming of what lay before them, they parted.

She watched him as he walked down the long terrace, he turned to salute her, and the sunlight fell full upon his handsome face. As she saw it then, she saw it never more.

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

### WITH MURDER IN HER HEART.

**A**GATHA stood for a few moments watching the tall, fine figure of Sir Vane, wondering what sudden fits of anxiety and nervousness had overcome him, smiling to herself a tender, tremulous, happy smile, as she thought how dearly and how well he loved her—no wife in all the world was so well loved as she. She thought what her life would have been if she had missed him—if he had never visited the

Abbey, or if she had been away from home, she might never have seen him, and then—

'I cannot fancy that,' she said to herself—'my life without Vane. I should have been still at Whitecroft, tending my poor friends.'

She could not realize what her life would have been without Vane; he was the beginning, the centre, and the end of it. Her own life had so grown around his that she could not realize an existence in which he had no part.

Then she went in search of Victor Hugo's last book, the one she wanted to finish. She had a great dislike to garden hats, but as madame was always anxious when she saw an uncovered head, she took a scarf of fine white lace and twisted it round her head and neck. She took her book and went to the pretty terrace where Sir Vane liked best to sit. As she went out of the pretty *salon* where she had spent such happy hours, she little thought that she should never enter it again. Slowly down the white stone terrace she walked in the golden sunlight, she herself the sweetest fairest flower in that beautiful place. She did not know that she was going to have her heart broken.

The shadows of the graceful trees fell on the terrace, the red rose-leaves came showering down, the birds were singing, the tame white doves that she fed every morning came fluttering around her as she walked on to her doom.

If she had known what she was going to hear, she would have died there and then. She began to sing as she drew near the clustre of rose and myrtle—to sing a sweet love song—and she opened the book with the echo of the last few notes still on her lips.

As she sat there, the very picture of fair, guileless, and beautiful womanhood, the folds of white lace lying lightly on her golden head, the white hands holding the volume over which she was so completely engrossed, if the birds could have whispered a warning, if the wind could have bade her leave, if any of the fair flowers could have spoken and told her that the shadow of death hung over her, she would have been in some degree prepared for what was to happen. It came upon her unawares.

She was enjoying her book, the sun shining on her head, the birds singing around her; one white dove had made its rest-

ing-place on her shoulder. There could have been no fairer vision of youth and beauty—a picture that was never seen again.

Over the pages of the book, over the white terrace, fell a shadow. She looked up, and saw Valerie coming toward her; and the shadow over the open page was typical of the shadow over her life.

Agatha smiled as she looked at her, the last smile that was to be seen on her lips for long years to come.

'My husband has gone to Lucerne,' she said, 'and I am just finishing this book by Victor Hugo.'

'I am glad that I have found you alone,' said Valerie. 'I did not know that Mr. Heriot was out.'

The fact was that she had watched every movement of the pair, but it added a little zest to the intrigue to tell a few unnecessary untruths about it.

'I did not know that he was out,' she repeated; 'but I wanted to see you alone.'

The repetition of the word 'alone' struck Agatha.

'You wish to see me?' she said. 'I am quite at your service.'

But Valerie was in no hurry to begin; she felt like a murderer who held the sword with which to stab her victim, yet trembled to plunge it in. She took a seat by Agatha's side.

'Go on with your reading,' she said. 'I will not interrupt you.'

But Agatha closed the volume—it was the second of 'Les Misérables,' and she never finished the story.

'No,' she said; 'I can read any time; but you wish to speak to me now. I am at your service.'

Still the coward hand trembled and the coward heart hesitated.

Valerie looked at the lovely scene around her—how bright the sun, how fair the day, how lovely the whole land about—and her work was murder—murder more cruel by far than if she held dagger, poison, or sword.

She was not altogether heartless. If she could have separated them without pain she would have been better pleased. She did not enjoy cruelty, but, as her way to what she wanted lay over a woman's broken heart, why she must break it, there

was no help for it. Yet she was sorry, and would have avoided it if she could. The end she had in view was worth any sacrifice and any trouble.

To be Sir Vane's wife—Lady Carlyon of Garswood—she said to herself that she must try to keep that in view while she talked to Agatha.

Agatha waited two or three minutes in silence; she was struck by the expression of Valerie's face; it was pale and anxious, quite unlike her usual bright self.

'Are you in trouble?' she asked, suddenly, her old instinct of wanting to relieve every kind of grief she saw coming over her.

'No; at least not in one sense. I am not in trouble for myself, but I am in great distress over some one else.'

'I am sorry for that,' replied Agatha. 'I think the troubles of others are harder to bear than our own.'

'This is more than a trouble,' said Valerie; 'it is a grief and anxiety all in one—a shock, and to me, a horror.'

'I am sorry to hear it,' said Agatha, simply. 'Is it a trouble about some one near and dear to you?'

She hesitated for one-half minute.

'It is of some one whom I like very much.'

Now for the point of the knife in the white breast.

'Some one for whom I have not only a great affection, but also great respect,' said Valerie. 'In fact I may tell you that my trouble is over you.'

Agatha raised her face, so full of wonder that Valerie was dismayed; there was no fear; she did not change color; she looked perfectly astonished and mystified.

'About me?' she said. 'That is hardly possible. You have nothing to do with me; and if you had, there is nothing concerning me which could be either a shock or a horror.'

'I hope not,' said Valerie, with a sigh.

'You *hope not*,' repeated Agatha. 'I do not in the least understand you, mademoiselle.'

'I do not understand myself,' she said hurriedly. 'I only know that I have the most hateful task in the whole world to perform.'

'I cannot think,' said Agatha 'what you mean—you must surely be jesting.'

'Alas!' said Valerie, 'if it were only jesting, I should be happy enough.'

You who read have perhaps seen the sudden change a thunder-storm brings when, from the brightest sunlight, the scene changes to deepest gloom—when a funereal pall spreads over earth and sky, and the light suddenly leaves everything. So it was now. All the brightness, the light seemed to pass away. Agatha was distressed. Valerie, whatever she felt, looked miserable. They were coming face to face now—the one who believed herself to be Sir Vane's wife, and the one who hoped in reality to be so.

Agatha was perplexed, and began to wish that Sir Vane was at home. It was quite new to her to face any trouble without him—without his advice to guide her.

'What can she possibly mean?' thought Agatha. 'How I wish Vane were here.'

Valerie had risen from her seat and walked rapidly up and down the white terrace; then she came to Agatha's side.

'I must tell you,' she said. 'I hate doing it. I must tell you, because if it be true you have no right here; you have no right among people of our station; in fact, hard as it may seem, you have no place in the world at all.'

'Hush!' said Agatha, with gentle dignity, that almost subdued Valerie. 'Hush! you must not speak to me in this fashion. You are making some terrible mistake.'

For one moment Valerie thought could she be mistaken? could there have been any error in that well-studied report? if so—but no, it was quite impossible.

'I am afraid,' she said 'there is no mistake. The details are far too minute for that. Will you mind me asking you one or two questions?'

'You can have no possible right to ask me any questions,' she said; 'but I will answer anything you like to ask.'

'Are you Agatha Brooke, who disappeared sometime since from Whitecroft?'

'Yes, I am,' was the calm reply.

'Are you the lawful wife of the person whom you call Mr. Heriot, but who is really Sir Vane Carlyon?'

'Most decidedly I am.'

Again the calm, grave answer.

'Thank Heaven!' said Valerie, with conscious hypocrisy, 'that then, at any rate is false.'

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

### A CRUEL LETTER.



Valerie spoke she took from the pocket of her dress a thick envelope containing a letter, which she opened slowly.

'I am glad that you say this,' she continued, 'it makes my task less difficult.'

Indignation and anger rapidly took the place of wonder and surprise on Agatha's face. She rose from her seat; a gentle, calm dignity seemed to fall like a mantle over her.

'I do not understand at all,' she said, 'why you behave in this fashion to me. You have nothing to do with me, nor can you have any concern in my affairs.'

'None in the least,' said Valerie, 'except so far as concerns me.'

'No affairs of mine can concern you,' said Agatha. 'And now, if you please, mademoiselle, we will end the conversation.'

'Not at all,' she replied; 'we have not yet begun it. I have something to say which must be said, and you must listen. It concerns you more than me, but the truth must be sifted. You say that you are Agatha Brooke, from Whitecroft, and that you are the lawful wife of Sir Vane Carlyon. Now I want you to listen to this letter. Do not think I have brought it to you in an unkind spirit—it is not that; but having read it, I must ask whether the contents be true or not. Pray take your seat again, Mrs. Heriot—Lady Carlyon—or Miss Brooke—I am not sure which name is yours.'

Agatha sat down again, and Valerie opened the letter. 'You will believe me,' she said, 'that I am really sorry to read such words as these to you.'

'Make no more apologies,' said Agatha, gravely; 'let me hear what you have to read.'

And Valerie, holding the envelope under her eyes, said:

'You see the letter is addressed to me—here is my name—"Mademoiselle D'Envers, Chateau Bellefleurs, Lucerne"—the postmark is Paris, the handwriting quite unknown to me, and there is no signature.'

'An anonymous letter,' said Agatha gravely.

'Yes; but it seems also the letter of a friend, at least I cannot help thinking so. Listen, and tell me, Mrs. Heriot. I will read it to you. It begins thus:

"The writer of this letter is a sincere friend of Madame la Baronne, and of her niece, Mademoiselle D'Envers. Madame is quite unknown to the writer, who had, however, the happiness to meet and admire mademoiselle in Paris.

"The writer is averse to anonymous letters; but this case is so peculiar and so painful, he knows of no other method to adopt.

"Just before the writer tells his story, he wishes to swear to the entire truth of every word written here. It will bear the most minute investigation; it will bear every inquiry; it is true as an eternal truth. This is the story, and the writer writes it out of respect to mademoiselle. If ever the truth should become known, it would be highly prejudicial to madame, and would probably affect mademoiselle's settlement in life most materially.

"At this present time, residing under the roof of madame, at Chateau Bellefleurs, are an English lady and gentleman who pass by the name of Mr. and Mrs. Heriot. They assume to be husband and wife, but they are not so; there has been no marriage, and no semblance of marriage between them. The gentleman's real name is Sir Vane Carlyon—the name of the person residing with him is Agatha Brooke. Sir Vane Carlyon is a man of bad character; he is very rich, and his estate at Garswood is a very fine one. He has never been a good man, but always a *roue* and a profligate; he has no respect for women—a woman's honor or fair name is less than nothing to him. He has been famous always for his amours and adventures, his intrigues and gallantry; his name has figured more than once in the divorce court. It is said of him that he never spared a



man in his anger or a woman in his love. It is said of him that he has ruined more homes and broken more hearts than any man in England. Six years ago he ran away with beautiful, flighty Lady Dundee; she died in Italy some years since, and it was said that he has forgotten even her name. The writer could relate several true stories of the ruin and devastation this same man has brought on homes where only happiness reigned before.

"The girl with him is one for whom only profound compassion can be felt. She is not his wife, and poor thing! never will be. She is no more Mrs. Heriot, or Lady Carlyon, than she is the Sultana of Turkey. There was never even a semblance of marriage between them. The circumstances under which they came to live together are these:

"Sir Vane Carlyon went on a visit to Lord Croft, at the Abbey near Whitcroft, and there he saw Agatha Brooke.

"It is not the writer's province to tell how he compassed her ruin; it is sufficient that he did so compass it, and he persuaded her to leave home with him.

"In justice to her it must be said that, previously to this, she led not only a good but a most exemplary life. She was noted for her charity, for her goodness to the poor—indeed she was called the angel of the poor.

"When she left home with Sir Vane, she left a letter saying that she was happy and married, but that her marriage for some time was to be kept secret. Now the real fact of the matter is this—that there never was any marriage.

"Sir Vane may have deceived her—he is clever enough to deceive any one; but he certainly never married her, certainly never intended to do so. Men of his calibre do not choose a wife from her class. She was only a doctor's daughter. He could have married a royal princess—judge whether it was probable he would marry her."

A faint gasping sound made Valerie look round hastily. Surely her victim was not escaping already. A fainting fit at this juncture would spoil all.

But there was no fainting—no sign of it; only a white face, with white lips and great frightened eyes, so full of anguish and woe that it was pitiful to look at them. The face, a few minutes since so full of life and beauty, looked more like a stone

mask than a human countenance. Valerie saw her lips move, but no sound came from them only a long-drawn quavering sigh, like the faint wail of the winter wind.

'She will bear it to the end,' thought Valerie, 'and then she may die if she will.'

Valerie resumed the reading of surely the most cruel letter that was ever written.

"Sir Vane's vagaries, follies, sins and crimes do not concern me, you will say. No, certainly not; but this concerns me—that he should dare take his mistress, and pass her off as his wife, under the roof of a friend whom I respect as I respect madame. I, for one, cannot in silence pass so great an insult by. I think madame ought to know the truth, so I tell it to you. From what I have heard of Agatha Brooke, I should say that in some way or other, Sir Vane has most cruelly and basely deceived her. If so, you, mademoiselle, ought to tell her the truth; the longer she remains in ignorance, the more terrible will the knowledge of the truth be when it does come. Some diseases require a sharp knife; in this case of moral disease you must use a sharp remedy.

"If she is innocent, and has been betrayed, you are bound to tell her the truth. Either she is Sir Vane's wife or she is not; if she is, then I have been grossly misinformed; if she is not, she ought to know the truth—she ought to know that she has fallen from her high estate of pure womanhood—that she can never be classed with the good, the pure, and innocent again—that she is a fallen star—that, but for the paltry distinction of money and better clothes, there is no difference between her and the woman from whom all other women shrink—that, while she keeps up the appearance of something like sanctity, she is in reality a very Magdalene. As I said before, it is just possible that she sinned in ignorance. Be that as it may she ought to know where her sin has placed her.

"She ought to know that she has lost her good name, her fair name, her place among the pure and innocent, her honor for all time; that no tears and no repentance can restore them to her; that other women will draw aside as she passes by, lest the touch of her dress should be contagion; that so long as she lives, no woman worthy the name will ever consort with her or call her friend; she will be for ever a by-word and re-

proach, a shame to all women. If she does not know these things you are bound to tell her; if she knows them and does not care, you have nothing to do but insist upon their leaving the chateau at once; if she does not know it tell her; if she be wise, if she would prove that she has been sinned against, not sinning, if she desires to show that she hates sin and loves virtue, if she wishes to repair as far as she can the evil done she will at once, when she knows the truth, go—she ought never to look on the face of her betrayer again.

“Let her rise and go forth; let her leave her sin; let her hate her deceiver. Let her show her determination to have done with such horrible, hateful sin, by leaving him at once. For your own sake, for your own reputation, you must tell this truth to Madame la Baronne; and if you are ever to establish yourself in the world, you must at once give up the acquaintance of one fallen from her pure estate of womanhood. I write this in kindness. I write it to put you on your guard. I write to you as I should wish any gentleman, any man of honor, to write to a sister of my own, were she situated as you are. You, a noble, refined lady, belonging to one of the oldest and noblest families in France—you, of stainless lineage and stainless name, have no right to be under the same roof with the mistress of a *roue*—a profligate who plays with the honor and the hearts of women.

“If you wish to be merciful to her, the kindest thing that you can do will be to help her away—help her to some decent way of getting her living, and keeping her from a yet deeper fall. I do not sign my name, but I beg you to believe that I am your best friend.”

‘Oh, Heaven! oh, Heaven!’ cried the voice, so full of anguish that it was not like a human voice. ‘Oh, Heaven, it is not true!’

A despairing grasp was laid on Valerie’s arm; the face so full of woe was raised to hers.

‘It cannot be true!’ she cried, throwing her white arms in the air—‘it *cannot* be true! Heaven could not be so cruel! It is not true! Oh, thank Heaven, I am indeed Sir Vane’s wife! Those wicked, cruel words have made me forget. I am Sir Vane’s wife—who says I am not? He married me. Oh, Heaven! who shall say these horrible things of me?’

Such bitter tears! such bitter sobs!—such anguish and woe were in her face, and voice that Valerie was almost afraid to look at her.

'You had better refrain from those tragical airs,' she said, 'and tell me what you mean by saying Sir Vane married you. Explain it to me.'

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

'YOUR LIFE HAS BEEN A LIVING LIE!'



VALERIE was half frightened. She had expected that the letter would make a great impression upon Agatha; she had quite expected that the girl would either weep passionate tears, rave about her wrongs, or grow sullenly silent and not speak at all; but she was not prepared for this deadly despair. She could not beat back the hands that clung to her with despairing cries; she could not help seeing that the woe and anguish on that beautiful face were beyond any power to recall. Then Agatha remembered another thing. She had most faithfully promised Sir Vane never to mention the marriage, yet she must either tell the story or she could not tell what would happen. To live as a wife, and yet not to be one, was, she knew, a crime so great, so terrible, that she could not endure the thought of having committed it. In that case it was Heaven she had offended more than man, and, during the whole course of her innocent life, she had never once, to her knowledge, wilfully offended Heaven. The bare idea was horrible to her. These thoughts flashed through her mind with the rapidity of lightning, while the dark eyes watching her noted the struggle.

'He has told her not to mention it, and she is afraid,' she thought to herself; but I will have the truth.'

'Agatha,' she said, 'it is of no use for me to go through the farce of calling you Mrs. Heriot—Agatha, you had better

trust me—tell me your story, and I will tell you what you are, trust me. I know the world, I understand the law and the legal ceremonies of marriage. Tell me your story, and let me judge for you. If there has been any marriage between you and Sir Vane, the writer of this letter ought to be flayed alive.'

The white-stricken face that looked already as though years of misery had passed over it, was raised appealingly to hers.

'It is true,' with a great sob. 'I am indeed Sir Vane's wife, He married me.'

'Then my dear child—for you are nothing more than a child—if that be the case, if you are really his wife, if you are really Lady Carlyon, why do you pass by another name, a false name?'

'It is not a false one—it is his second name.

'None the less false if it be used for disguise. Why does he not give you his name and title?'

No answer came from the pale lips.

'Men—above all, men of Sir Vane's rank—do not give their wives a name to disguise them, but to make them known. Again, if you are his wife, why does he bring you to the solitude of a Swiss chateau? You are beautiful and graceful—why has he not introduced you to his friends, taken you to his beautiful home at Garswood? Why has he shut you up here!'

'He knows best,' sobbed the faint voice. 'I have never questioned him.'

'You must have noticed one thing,' continued Valerie; 'most husbands *share* with their wives, they use the same initials, the same crests, the same motto; you do not. Everything belonging to Sir Vane is quite distinct from you, that is the strongest proof to me.'

'I am his wife,' she repeated.

'No one is more pleased to hear it than I am,' she said. 'It would have been a terrible thing to have had all that *expose* here; but you see, Agatha, I must look to myself. You may think it all right, but if it is all wrong, then it is complete ruin to me. I must know the truth. Tell me how, when and where you were married. I know you hesitate because you have promised Sir Vane. Do *not* hesitate—the truth must be known now that the question is started. If you do not tell it to me you will have to tell it to some one else. It is not

likely that my aunt after reading this will remain content. You had better trust me I am young like yourself, and can feel for you. Older women will sit in judgment on you. I should sympathise. Tell me and I will help you.'

Agatha had fallen on her knees on the white stone terrace; the same doves were fluttering around with pretty cooing cries; the sunlight fell on the marble faun and crimson flowers; it fell, too, on the white, miserable face raised in despair to the dark one.

'I am indeed his wife, she repeated. 'Do you think—could any one in this wide world think—that I should be here with him were it otherwise? I could not. Oh, Valerie, I have loved and served God all my life. I have always thought of the Christian virgin Agatha, and tried to make my life like hers. She preferred to die rather than to deny God. And I—oh believe me—I would have died a hundred deaths rather than have offended God; I would indeed. How could you—how could any one—think that I should be with Sir Vane unless he had married me?'

Something like pity stole into the heart of this cruel woman who was torturing the other. If this girl was really as innocent, as child-like, and as simple as she seemed, then had Sir Vane Carlyon done the deed that a fiend would scorn. As Valerie watched that tortured face she despised him. Surely from a world full of women he might have chosen another, and have left this beautiful wild-flower alone.

'I do not know much of the world,' said Agatha, in a voice that was so piteous; 'but I know right from wrong, and I have not gone wrong. Believe me, believe me, I am his wife. Lady Anne and Joan, my father's old servant, warned me—both of them. They said I should know the true love from the false; they said if he, Sir Vane, did not love me, he would only amuse himself by talking to me, and then, when he was tired, he would go away, and forget even my name. See how false it was. He could not go away without me. He said that he could not live without me, and he asked me to go with him; then I knew that he loved me.'

Keener pain and pity filled the heart of the beautiful woman who held the sword in her hand. It had been a cowardly, cruel thing to deceive such a child—most cowardly, most cruel.

'But, Agatha, you should have been married first before you came away with him.'

'So I was. Oh! believe me, I was married. He made me his wife. I should never have dreamed of going away with him if I had not been his wife. I hardly knew that people ever did such a thing. He would not have asked me to go away unless he had first made me his wife. I should have hated, not loved him, had that been the case.'

For a few minutes Valerie looked puzzled. Could the detective have possibly made any such mistake? Had he sent her wrong information? It was hardly credible, and yet this persistent repetition of a fact must have some foundation.

'Then,' she said slowly, 'it is true that you were married to Sir Vane before you left home?'

A light crossed the white despair of Agatha's face.

'It is quite true,' she said.

'Now, will you tell me when and where you were married? Then we shall be able to see our way more clearly,' said Valerie.

But no rapid, frank reply came from Agatha's lips. A quiver of great fear passed over her face; her heart beat more slowly; the blood seemed to freeze in her veins; her hands grew cold and stiff. For the first time a great overwhelming dread came to her. She had most implicitly believed Sir Vane; no doubt of his truth, honor, or loyalty had ever assailed her. He had told her that the fashion of marriage had changed—that there was no longer any need for all the ceremonies and prayers people had once believed in. She never doubted the truth any more than she doubted the light of the sun. She had never, in her short life, heard of such a thing; but now a horrible fear came to her—it seemed to clutch her heart like a cold iron band. *Suppose there was anything wrong about the marriage?* What then? Oh Heaven! What then?

'Agatha,' continued Valerie, 'tell me where you were married. Was it in the church at Whitecroft?'

'No.'

'Was it in any chapel there?'

'No.'

'Was it in a registrar's office?'

'No.'

'Were you married in England or in France?'

'In England.'

And from the tortured heart came a cry to Heaven for pity.

'I am afraid,' said Valerie, gently, 'that you have not been married at all. The laws of marriage in England are so strict, so simple a child could understand them. There can be no marriage without the law of the church or of the land. A marriage must take place either in a church or in a registrar's office; or if it be in a private house, by a properly appointed minister. Unless you were married in one of these three methods, you are not married at all.'

'For Heaven's sake, do not say so—do not say so. I shall die. I cannot bear it.'

'You must face the truth. Your life has been a living lie long enough. You must face the truth. Tell me where you were married.'

It was pitiful to hear the sweet, child-like voice that replied:

'We were married at Whitecroft—*Sir Vane married me himself.*'

Triumph flashed in the eyes of the beautiful woman, who was risking her life on one throw—triumph that should have crushed her with shame; yet she feared and revered the purity and innocence of the girl kneeling at her feet, and clinging to her with such pleading hands.

'Tell me about it,' she said, gently; 'do not be afraid. You have to face the truth sometime—face it now, with me. Tell me all about the marriage.'

'We were together in a beautiful place—in the woods, a place we both loved, and where I often met him. He told me he was going away, and he asked me to go with him; he said he could not live without me, and I knew quite well that I could not live without him, I loved him so well. He began to teach me about the new law of marriage.'

'What is that?' asked Valerie. 'I have never heard of it. What is it?'

Alas, alas! if she, this woman of the world, who had every kind of knowledge, if she knew nothing of it, what then?

'He explained it to me,' said Agatha, her eyes fixed with piteous entreaty on Valerie's face. 'He told me that marriage was really the union of two hearts.'



'So it is,' interrupted Valerie; but even hearts are human, and must be governed by human laws.'

'He told me that when two hearts became one, and when two people pledged themselves to each other until death and prayed Heaven to bless them, that they were then really married, and that the old, cumbersome signs and ceremonies were done away with. 'There need be no ringing of bells and strewing of flowers', he said. But I had been to a wedding, and I had heard the prayers. I told him how beautiful they were, and he knelt down. I knelt with him, and he said them all over; then he told me, and I knew I was his wife.'

'Did you believe it?' asked Valerie, wonderingly.

'Yes, certainly I did.'

'And Sir Vane taught you that?'


'Yes.'

'Then may Heaven forgive him. He is a greater villain than I thought any man could be,' and Valerie was silent for some minutes.

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

### A WOMAN CRUSHED TO EARTH.

 VALERIE was triumphant. She would not speak for some few moments, lest the elation she felt should be shown in her voice. It was just as she had expected—a mere intrigue on the part of Sir Vane; a matter of life and death for Agatha. There had been no marriage; Sir Vane was free to marry, and she congratulated herself on the plot; yet she could not help pitying the terrified girl kneeling at her feet. She must have known the truth some time; better, perhaps, that it should be now.

'I am grieved for you, Agatha,' she said. 'You have been basely and cruelly deceived. You may believe me—all the more that I am sorry, for your sake, to say it—but that was no marriage; you are no more married than I am.'

'Do not say so. Oh Heaven! spare me—do not say so!'

'Poor child! the sooner you know all the truth the better. That is no marriage, and you are no wife. Listen to me. There are wicked men like Sir Vane, who have no sense of honor where women are concerned; they love, they betray, they leave them as easily as they throw aside old gloves. Sir Vane has had many loves. You, see, the writer of this letter knows a great deal about him; he has never had any principle or sense of honor. I do not wish to wound you, but ever since he has been here, while you have thought him devoted to you, I have known some one else whom he has admired and made love to in an honorable fashion.'

She waited for a reply, but the girl was too stunned with her misery to ask a question.

'You must see,' continued Valerie, 'that to outsiders everything is quite clear. Sir Vane, a rich, unmarried baronet, who has known no other will than his own pleasure, goes out visiting; he meets you, a simple country-girl—and you are even more ignorant and more inexperienced than any other girl of your age would be—he sees you, admires you, falls in love with you after his fashion; but he finds you good and innocent. Had you been less good, he would have been far more frank; he would not have gone through even that farce of marriage. He would have said, I love you, but have no thought of marriage.' He found you good and innocent, so he gave himself the trouble to deceive you. He tells you all this nonsense, and you believe it; then he goes through the farce of marriage, and you believe in it. He adopts a false name, brings you abroad, keeps you secluded, and never brings any friends near you. Now listen and believe me. In another year or two he would tire of you. He must marry some day, and will marry some noble or wealthy lady; he must have heirs to succeed him. This pleasant love-dream with you is but a little interlude—do you not see?'

She shrank lower and lower, with such a wail of anguish and pain as had never before come from human lips.

'It is a great pain to me; she continued, 'to tell you these things, but you must know them. The day would most certainly come when Sir Vane himself would leave you, and that would be harder to bear than this.'

No graceful young tree, with springing green leaves—no fair flower opening its heart to the sun, and suddenly struck with lightning—no bright singing-bird, suddenly caught and caged, could have been more abject and pitiful than this hapless girl, struck down by the cruel words that declared there was no hope for her.

She crouched lower and lower, until her face rested on the white stone terrace. All the pride of her youth, beauty, love, and life smitten from her with unerring hands.

Ah! where were those who loved her?—the fair young mother who loved her, and who had named her after the fair saint with the palm branch? Where were the kindly father, the faithful old servant, the women, men and children, who would have given their lives for her?

She lay there, crushed, blinded, stunned with her great shame and great misery, and of all those whom she had helped and tended, there was not one in this hour of need and despair to help her; not one to raise the golden head, with its weight of shame and woe; not one to kiss the face that wore the whiteness and chill of death; not one to clasp the cold hands and whisper words of pity.

Valerie looked at her as the fair head fell on the white stone.

'It is very like murder,' she thought to herself, 'but it will soon be over, and she must have known it sometime or other—at least, I have told her in kind words.'

'You must rouse yourself, Agatha,' continued Valerie. 'I suppose you will see Sir Vane and tell him this?'

'Oh, Vane, Vane,!' sobbed the girl. 'Oh, Vane, my love, my darling, would to Heaven you had left me dead at Whitecroft! What have I done that such a terrible fate should be mine? Vane has always been good to me; has always loved me. Why, he met me first at the church door, and he loved me from that moment. He could not be so cruel to me; he has not a cruel face, or a cruel heart. It is you who have stabbed me and slain me.'

'I was bound to tell you the truth,' said Valerie, coldly. 'You have evidently no idea of your position, and you must be made to understand it.'

But the cruel, biting words passed over the girl's head. She was far too miserable to heed them. The prick of a pin

does not pain when one suffers from a sword wound. The very utterance of the name of Vane seemed to have unlocked the flood-gates of her sorrow. She wept such bitter, passionate tears ; she sobbed until her whole frame shook ; she wept until Valerie in stern pity almost hoped she would die. It was the thought of Vane—Vane, whom she loved so dearly—in whom she had such firm, implicit faith. It was Vane who had betrayed her ; who had made her a shame and disgrace among woman—Vane, whose beloved face she would never see, never kiss again. In stern pity Valerie let her weep on. She could not check those tears.

‘Agatha,’ she said, ‘you must rouse yourself ; it will not do for any one to find you here—we should have a scandal all over the place. You must rouse yourself, and make up your mind what you are going to do.’

She was not a tender-hearted woman, but the sight of that crushed figure lying there, the golden hair all dishevelled, the grief, such as few ever know, on her white face, made Valerie feel uncomfortable. It was as though she had plunged a knife in her heart, and was waiting until she died. Valerie felt that she could not bear it much longer

‘Something,’ she said, ‘must be done at once. You cannot remain here ; my aunt and I would both be compromised. You must go at once. Perhaps it will be better for you to tell Sir Vane that we know the truth, and cannot meet you again.’

It was something to remember—a way in which Agatha rose from her crouching attitude and faced her accuser.

‘You tell me,’ she cried, ‘that Vane, my lover and husband, to whom I trusted my body and soul, has deceived and betrayed me ; that he has lied, and cheated, and made me a by-word. You yourself called him villain, and you dare to suggest that I should see or speak to such a man again. If I am all you say, it is unconsciously so. I call Heaven to witness that I would rather have been dead a thousand times than have offended Heaven. I have not done it wilfully ; but do you think, after finding out my sin, after knowing all you have told me, that I should ever see Sir Vane again ?’

Valerie’s heart gave a great thrill of triumph. This was even better than she had dared to hope. If she went away quietly, without any scene or scandal, then the field was clear

for her. She would ride triumphantly, as it were, over the course.

'It would be your wisest and best plan certainly to decline seeing him again, Agatha. You know best; though, of course, he must make provision for you.'

'Provision for me?' she cried. 'Do you think it possible that I could ever take anything from him. How little you know me.'

'So much the better,' thought Valerie. 'These affairs are better ended at once.'

'I admire your spirit,' she said; 'but you must consider the result. You must live, and you cannot live without air. Would it not be better to see him first, and see what he will arrange for you?'

'How can you speak to me in that way?' she cried, with such pathetic mournfulness that Valerie, for half an instant, felt shocked at herself.

'What can anything matter to me now?' she said. 'And you think that I can care whether I have money or none. I shall creep away from here and die. Ah, if you or any one else had loved my Vane, and found him false, you would understand. What could a hundred lives matter after that. Less than nothing.'

Valerie said to herself that certainly nothing could be better than to creep away and die—it would be the nicest thing she could do—far wiser than to live on with that horrible pain in her heart, and that anguish of woe in her eyes.

'There is one thing,' said Agatha, and a flush of color rose for one minute to her white face and then faded—'there is one thing, I have not sinned wilfully. I knew little of life, and I was very young. I loved Sir Vane, and I believed what he told me. I never asked myself whether it was right or wrong; I believed it as simple and perfect truth. I thought I was Sir Vane's wife, now I find that I have accepted the position of a great sinner. I protest again, of my own will, I am no sinner, and what you have read in that letter does not apply to me. I am innocent of any knowledge of wrong.'

'Still,' said Valerie, 'although you may be quite right, you will find the world will decide against you. Its laws are strict and severe where the honor and purity of women are concerned;

when the same world know what you have been, it will not wait to ask whether it was your fault or not. The very fact of holding such a position will cut you off from the world of good men and women.'

'I will not believe it!' cried Agatha. 'What have I done? I believed the man whom I loved. What harm have I done?'

'I suppose,' said Valerie, 'that you are paying the price of ignorance. I—'

But she had not time to finish her sentence; a servant came to say that some visitor had arrived, and madame would be pleased if mademoiselle would go to the *salon*.

'I will not be long,' said Valerie. 'Wait here for me; I have more to say.'

'Will you give me that letter?' asked Agatha.

'Yes,' she replied, placing it in her hand, little dreaming what use she intended to make of it.

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### CHAPTER XXX.

'YOU HAVE DECEIVED OTHERS, BUT NONE SO CRUELLY AS ME.'

**S**UCCESSFULLY carried out, thought Valerie to herself, thankful to get away from the sight of the white, despairing face, thankful to be out of the hearing of that sad, sweet voice. 'Nothing was ever better planned or better executed. I would make an excellent ambassadress; I could arrange all those little difficulties between Germany, Austria, Spair, and those wonderful provinces that people talk so much about, yet no one seems to know just where they lie. I am thankful that it is over, and it has been done effectually. I shall never forget her; I shall always say that I have witnessed a murder. How innocent and simple she is! How cruel of him, and what a wicked man he is!'

Yet wicked and cruel as she thought him, it made no difference to her fixed intention of becoming his wife. Even as

she talked to the visitor, she was wondering in her own mind what Sir Vane would do or say—how long he would grieve over Agatha, and how long it would be before he asked her to marry him, and whether he would be vexed with her if ever her share in the matter came out.

The visitor did not seem inclined to go, having driven some distance to see Madame la Baronne. She consented to remain to dinner, and Valerie had to entertain her. There was no chance of returning to the terrace to give the finishing blow to her work there.

Once, during the course of the long, sunny afternoon, madame asked :

‘I wonder where Mrs. Heriot is? I have heard nothing of her to-day.’

‘She was in the garden this morning,’ replied Valerie; ‘I saw her there.’

‘Mr. Heriot has gone to Lucerne, Josef tells me. Do you think she is lonely? Would she care to join us, do you think, Valerie?’

And mademoiselle shuddered as she thought of the ghastly face and figure she had left on the terrace.

‘I think not,’ she said. ‘Our visitor is not very amusing. Mrs. Heriot would not like to say “No,” and she would most certainly be bored. Better not ask her, aunt.’

And the kindly baronne bowed to the decision of her niece.

When Valerie left her, Agatha made an effort to go to the house. She had no intention of remaining there until Valerie returned. Grief has a strange physical effect on some people. In the midst of her horrible anguish a sudden lethargy came over her—a sense of almost intolerable fatigue, a pain in her limbs as though she had walked long miles. Her eyes were so hot and heavy she must close them; her head ached, her brain seemed to be on fire. If she could but creep away to lie down somewhere, close her eyes, and die! She almost forgot what her trouble was in the pain of that sense of fatigue.

There was a great group of myrtle and ilex behind the marble faun; she looked with wistful, piteous eyes at the marble face, and rippling waters; and then she could never remember how she came to be there. She found herself on the soft grass

underneath the myrtle ; she could see the blue sky, and it seemed very close to her ; the wind gently fanned her face, the white doves fluttered and cooed near her. Oh, Heaven ; what was the sweet sense of rest coming over her !—what horrible dream, what nightmare possessed her ? A face was smiling above hers—the very face of Saint Agatha in the eastern window smiled on her, and seemed to bless her ; then her white eyelids fell, and she slept. That sleep most certainly saved her life.

She awoke after two hours, shivering, cold and seriously ill. At first she could not remember why she was sleeping there alone ! Heaven help those who forget a sorrow in sleep and awake to remember it by degrees—there is no experience in life more terrible than this.

Little by little it all comes back to her. She remembered every word of that fatal letter—nay, she held it there in her hands. A long convulsive shudder came over her. She knew that she must never see Vane's face again. She could not rise from the ground until the trembling of her limbs had stopped. She lay quite still with closed eyes and began to think.

To try to think—for at first no idea would come clearly to her. She could only keep this one fixed that Vane had deceived and betrayed her. She was never to look upon his face again. She tried to think it over. Vane, the handsome, ardent, eager lover—Vane, whose beautiful face had seemed to her the face of a god, it was so grand and so noble—Vane, whose dark eyes had always been full of the light of love for her. She remembered the sweetness of his voice—his adoring caressing love, his constant, worshipping care ; how could she live without it ? She cried aloud in her distress, but no Vane answered. Never again would the warm clasp of his hand, the warm loving kisses from his lips comfort her—never more. She was desolate and in despair.

To this girl whose faith and love were so great, it was a terrible shock that one human being could ever so cruelly deceive another. All the time he was at Whitecroft, when he was in the woods and fields, when he stopped and talked to her over the garden gate, when he was with her at the beautiful church—all the time it was her betrayal he had planned—it was not love.



'Not love! Oh, Vane, my lover, not love!' she cried, aloud, and the white doves, scared, flew away.

She thought of her old home; she could never go back there in her shame and disgrace—never should she see her father or Joan again. How Joan had warned her.

'All men are wolves,' the old servant had said.

At the time she had laughed in her heart, thinking how unlike that handsome lover of hers was a wolf; how she realized what the words meant. He must have loved her, he never could have feigned all that; but then Valerie said he would have tired of her. What should she do? The first thing was to go away, to go where she should never see his face again.

The writer of that letter said that, while she wore the outward appearance of sanctity, she was a Magdalene. Ah, no, that was not true; it should never be true. She would rather die, than offend God; rather die than do wrong.

Now that she knew the horrible truth; she would not see him again; she would not wait for him. It might be, even now, that he loved her well enough to marry her, but if he knelt to ask her, if he prayed as a man had never prayed, she would never marry him. She would go away where he could never find her, where she would never see him. She had not wilfully offended Heaven, and she would try to atone.

The one thing clear to her mind was that she must go—go before his return. He would be back soon, for the sun was shining over the lake, with the peculiar brightness that comes before setting.

He would be back soon. She had promised to be on the terrace to meet him. Ah, never more would she be there to meet him on his return, with shining face and loving lips.

With all her resolves she knew how she loved him, and how weak she would be in his hands. If she would save herself, she must go; if she would protest against the wrong that had been done to her, if she would show that her share in it was unconscious, if she would show that she hated vice and loved virtue, she must go. If ever at any time her story became known, those who told it must add, 'The very same hour in which she found out the truth, she left him and never spoke to him again.'

What would her father and Joan say if they knew that she was not married, after all? What would the poor women who

had loved her so well think? Stately Lady Anne, and madame here, who had been so kind to her, they must all hear the same story—that she had left him at once.

She rose, and stood leaning for a few minutes against the marble faun. It was 'good-by' to the rippling waters and the pretty grounds, to the white terrace. Never, except in her dreams, should she see them again.

She walked back to the house. It was well that she saw no one, for her face had not regained its color, and her eyes were wild with fear. She went to her room, and the first thing that caught her eye was the beautiful jewelled writing-table that Sir Vane had given to her. She would write to him and inclose the letter; then he would know why she had left him, and when he thought of her in the future he would see how she hated money, and remember that she left him, dearly as she loved him, the same hour in which she found it out.

She took pen and paper. Her heart did not break as she addressed this her last letter to him. Her eyes were dry and tearless, even the very faculty of suffering seemed dimmed and deadened.

'I know all, Vane,' she wrote. 'I inclose you this letter that you may know it is no longer a secret how you have deceived me. You have been away a few hours, and while you have been absent—while the sun was shining and the flowers blooming—my heart was broken. Oh, Vane, how could you be so cruel to me, whom you loved? I was so happy in my old home, and I can never be happy again. I shall never see the old church, nor the dear Agatha, nor my mother's grave again—never again! Why did you not leave me?'

'If I were not good enough to be your wife—If you were ashamed to marry me because I was a simple country girl—why did you not go away and leave me? I should have been always content with my life but for you. You have taken away my fair name; you have covered me with shame and disgrace; you have taken me from the ranks of good women. I cannot write what you have made of me. Mademoiselle showed me this letter this afternoon. Remember always, at once when I knew the truth, I went away. Dearly as I love you, I have not waited to say good-by.'

'I shall never see your face again, Vane. Oh, dear, lost love, good-by!—dear love who has betrayed me, good-by! My

life is all spoiled, all blighted, but I cannot part from you in anger—I have loved you so well.

‘You will miss me very much. You have been wicked and cruel, yet you have some little love for me. You have deceived others, but none so cruelly as me. My dear, lost love, I go from you. We shall meet face to face at the Judgment Seat, and then I shall ask you for my innocence and my soul.

‘Good-by! Remember the last words that shall ever pass between us are these:

I forgive you!’

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## CHAPTER XXXI.

### A LONELY WANDERER.

**A**GATHA folded the anonymous letter in the one she had just written, placed them both in an envelope, directed it to Sir Vane, placed it on the toilet cushion where he must see it at once when he entered the room. She kissed it with trembling lips; while the world lasted, while suns rose and set, while golden stars stretched over the heaving seas, while she lived and he lived, this was the last communication between them; no more words, smiles, kisses, or tears; no more greeting or reproach; eternal silence henceforth, and forever. She looked once more around the room in which they had been so happy.

‘And all the time,’ she said to herself, ‘he has been deceiving me; when he kissed me, when he carressed me, when he spoke most lovingly to me, he was most cruel, and most false.’

She was perfectly stunned; every few minutes the whole reality seemed to come to her with unknown force, seemed to overwhelm her afresh, seemed to daze and confound her; one thought was quite clear to her, she must go before he came home, and go at once.

She never thought where, in what direction her wandering footsteps were to go; she never thought of taking money, of providing for herself; she never even went into the room to

put on a dress or a cloak ; the hat which she wore in the garden lay there. she took it up and wrapped a garden shawl around her ; she wandered through the rooms, through the pretty corridors ; she had no fixed determination where to go, no resolve, no idea, only that she was to go away, so that she might not see Sir Vane.

She wandered through the grounds, down to the shores of the lake, walking always like one half blinded.

It did not seem to her that she was walking without an object—without an end in view, except to get away from Sir Vane. She walked through the long, quiet afternoon ; the sun set and the moon rose. She had gone far from the lake now ; the blue deep waters were left behind. She had made her way into the pretty town of Lucerne, and as she entered it the clocks were all striking one, yet the faintest dawn was not near—this was the darkest hour of night.

She found herself in a large square, ornamented with a fine statue and four fine fountains, then with a sudden shock she realized the fact that she was here in a strange city quite alone. She knew so little even of the ordinary habits of life that she never thought of going to any hotel. The only place of refuge that occurred to her was the railway station, and she made her way there.

She was flying from Lucerne, but she never thought whether she was going to England or France, or where. She sat for some time, having walked incessantly without resting. She would have sat there, in all probability, until she fainted with fatigue, but that a porter went up and asked if she were going by train to Basle. As well there as anywhere—she said yes. She asked if she could go from Basle to Paris? He told her, yes. Then she remembered that she must purchase a ticket ; then she bethought herself of money. In her desk at the chateau she had a roll of bank-notes, but she had not thought of them. Sir Vane had always been most generous in the way of money. She could have as much as she liked, as much and more as she could possibly spend. If she had remembered it even, she would not have taken it—she would not have touched it. Now the immediate necessity was for money to travel to Paris. When she reached Paris, she could, of course, seek work. She put her hand in the pretty little fancy pocket attached to her dress.

Ah, Heaven be praised! her purse was there. She remembered afterward that she had taken it because she had promised to lend some money to a needy woman she had found in a chalet by the lake. She was glad to find that it was filled with money. She would have no difficulty now in reaching Paris.

She sat in the railway station until the same civil young porter came to tell her the train was about to start.

She bought her ticket, and the man, looking at the white, haggard, young face, suggested that she should take some hot coffee before she began her journey. She looked at him in surprise. Did any one think that she could eat or drink, or care for anything again? If any one had asked her suddenly 'Why was she going to Paris?' she would have answered 'To die.'

It was a long journey, but she did not feel the fatigue of it—she seemed past all ordinary sensations. It was not so much the present, with its terrible burden—her mind wandered continually to the past. She was at Whitecroft, with Sir Vane, always in the woods, listening in fancy, over and over again, to the eager and impetuous words in which he had wooed her—of the supposed new law of marriage. Then she was with him at Paris, where he had lavished such costly gifts upon her, and it had seemed to him as nothing because of his great love. Then she was at Bellefleurs. It seemed to her that she could do nothing but contrast the fiction with the reality; she could only contrast her thoughts of him as they were now and as they had been then.

All the time he had been false. It was like barbed iron entering her soul to remember what the writer of that letter had said about him; she had believed so entirely that she was his first and only love; he had seemed so perfectly indifferent to all other women—during the whole time she had been with him she had never seen him give any other woman a thought; and yet Valerie said that even there, at Bellefleurs, he had cared for some one else! There had been no truth, no honor—it had all been a foul scheme and plan—not only an error, but a crime.

There was one part of her journey during which she lay back, with closed eyes, and tried to imagine herself back in the old gray church, praying to Heaven with her whole heart and soul

that this unconscious sin of hers might be forgiven—praying with weeping eyes; and then she woke suddenly, to find herself in a railway carriage, with a dull, dreary sense of pain such as words could never describe.

The rest of the journey was a dream. When it was dark she leaned back against the carriage with staring eyes, blinded more by pain than by darkness. When it was light she watched the magnificent scenery, the cloud-topped mountains, the valleys, the quaint old towns, the rivers spanned by rustic bridges, the green valleys—they were dim and blurred to her, although the moon and stars shone upon them. She sat quiet, without speaking or moving; people went in and out of the carriage and she did not see them. Many looked in wonder at the white, beautiful face, with its expression of agony and woe. What could have brought a blight upon one so young and fair?

At one of the stations between Basle and Paris the train stopped for passengers to take refreshment, and though several ladies went from the compartments, Agatha did not stir. One lady went to her and said, gently:

‘You look very ill—let me order some coffee for you.’ Her lips were so cold, so stiff, so dumb, she could hardly open them to answer. ‘I advise you to take something,’ continued the kind lady; ‘it will be some time before we reach Paris, and the train will not stop again.’

‘I could not drink it,’ she replied.

It annoyed her that any one should think she could either eat or drink. Did they not know that although her body was living, her heart was dead?

And at last, late at night, the train reached the great railway station, which even then was full of traffic, noise, and bustle. When the passengers left the train, there was the usual confusion of passengers crying out for their luggage, of porters and guards, of cabmen and coachmen. Through them walked this girl, with the beautiful figure and lovely colorless face, with white, set lips and burning eyes. Speaking to no one, looking neither to the right nor the left, she walked out into the brilliant, evil streets of Paris.

Evil escaped her. The bruised heart and crushed soul were aching with pain. She could not understand anything just then but sorrow. If she had met a weeping woman or a cry-

ing child she would have stopped to comfort her or it ; but the light-hearted revellers passing her by with laughter and song, they were less than nothing to her ; she neither heard nor saw them.

Down the white, hard pavement came a group of girls, singing, dancing—poor painted wretches, lost for this world and the next. They surrounded her and danced a wild war dance around her, until catching sight of the colorless face they ran off, scared and wondering.

'They are mad,' she thought.

She walked on through the narrow streets, through the broad boulevards, and again the same sensation of extreme fatigue came over her—she felt that her eyes must close. She never thought of going to any hotel. Hundreds of little children sleeping then in Paris would have been far more awake to the realities of life than she was ; hundreds of sleeping children would have known better where to go and what to do.

Away from this wide boulevard, she wandered down a wide street. Tall, white houses stood on one side, on the other she saw something like a square of green ; the street was very silent, there was not a sound. She came to a large house ; it could not have been a private house, it was so large. There was a great porch, with fluted pillars and seats around its broad steps, and over the door was a huge lamp which burned brightly.

She crept into the silent porch ; in the shadowy corner there was no sound ; great golden stars throbbed in the blue sky ; far off she fancied that she heard the rushing sound of a river ; by the bright light of the lamp she could see a great crucifix hanging in the porch, and she knew then that she was under the roof of some charitable institution.

She sat down in the dark shadow of the porch ; but that was not rest enough, so she lay down—stretched out her whole length on the wooden seat. Ah, that was rest. She looked from the sorrowful face and thorn-crowned head of the crucifix to the green leaves in the square. Ah, it was so sweet this rest ; slowly the sounds that had filled her ears—the rush of steam, the shrill shriek of the railway whistle, the rolling of the wheels, died out of her ears ; her eyelids drooped, she did not think of waking again, she did not wonder what she should do when morning came.

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The golden head that had for so long pillowed on her lover's heart had a hard resting place now, but she was a tired child falling asleep as a child sleeps on its mother's breast.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

## A PREMONITION.

THE mellow, golden, beautiful afternoon was at its brightest when Sir Vane returned from Lucerne. He had easily found out where the mistake was, and had transacted his business in a short time. It was long since he enjoyed a game of billiards, and at the Hotel Angelo there was a fine table, and always good players; he went for an hour, but he did not enjoy his game; the same terrible sense of foreboding followed him there. It was so strong upon him that his hand trembled and his game was spoiled. He tried to laugh at himself.

'I have laughed at nervous women a hundred times,' he said to himself, 'and now I am more nervous than the most fanciful of women.'

Yet he could not conquer it. It was all of Agatha—the most depressing thoughts and ideas—sudden starts of fancy. He thought once that he heard her cry out for him in the most piteous voice. How foolish it was; yet his nervous terror and apprehension were so great he determined to hasten back at once.

There is more in the world than even philosophers dream; between these two there was the strongest, deepest love, and though they were wide apart, the sorrow and despair of the one influenced the other. Who knows the mysteries that are yet to be discovered in the strange influence people have over each other?

Sir Vane drove rapidly to Bellefleurs; he was thinking of Agatha the whole way; he looked with satisfaction on the various little parcels placed in the carriage; he had seen a



bracelet of pale gold, studded with magnificent pearls, and he had thought it would add to the beauty of the fair, rounded arm that was whiter than even the pearls; he had purchased it for Agatha, paying the exorbitant price demanded by the jeweller with a *sang froid* that would have been creditable to a millionaire; in another shop he saw a cloud of fine, white, peerless lace, and he said to himself how well it would look wound around the golden head and white shoulders; he saw some English novels and purchased them, with some photographs that he thought would interest her; finally he purchased a bouquet of magnificent flowers.

'She likes me to take her plenty of flowers,' he said, 'she is always well pleased with them.'

So he drove home in the beautiful mellow sunlight, through the finest scenery in the world, with his heart heavy as lead, because he could not understand the presentiment that seemed to haunt him.

Ah, there was the blue, gleaming water of the lake, there the grand mountains covered with snow; and as he drove on, he saw the tall towers of the chateau between the trees.

The sense of relief that came to him was indescribable; he found that he had been afraid to come to the lake, not knowing what would meet him there; the blue waters laughed in the sunlight.

As he drove up the hill he said to himself that he would never laugh at nervous people again—that he should never forget that day and all he had suffered.

A turn of the hill, and then he sees the beautiful grounds of the chateau—the tall trees, the graceful fountains, the myrtle and the ilex; he sees the long, white terrace, and he knows that he is near her now.

There stands the marble faun; he is sure to see her in the spot where she promised to stand. The sun shines on the myrtle and the ilex where, a few hours since, the girl who loved him so well had been slain.

She was not there. The sun shone on the white faun, on the rippling water, but Agatha was not there.

His heart sank with a feeling of awe and fear; she had never broken a promise she had made to him, however slight; she had said she would be there waiting for him, and she was

not. Surely there was no reality in the terrible fear that had been tearing at his heart all day!

He threw the reins to the groom, gave orders that the different parcels in the carriage were to be taken to Mrs. Heriot's room, then hastened to find her.

She would be among the tall myrtles, he was sure—hiding, perhaps, half in jest; resting, perhaps, for the afternoon was warm; sleeping, perhaps, and he fancied the golden head resting against the trunk of a tree.

'Agatha!' he said, gently but there was no reply.

He did not notice a half broken branch of the myrtle and several crushed flowers—he did not know that just where he stood was where his victim had fallen when the sword was plunged into her heart. As Valerie had said, 'Murder was not pleasant,' and murder had certainly been done there.

He called her name again, but there was no reply; he went among the myrtle trees, looking where the shade was deepest; there was no sign of her; but he saw on the grass a piece of the ribbon she had worn that morning in her hair.

Ah, then, she had been here, watching most probably for him. Bless the loving, faithful heart and the beautiful face.

Then he walked through the grounds—he could hear from the open window of the *salon* the magnificent voice of Valerie D'Envers, singing an Italian love song—singing so beautifully that he stopped to listen.

'That woman would have made a fortune on the stage,' he said to himself; and then he laughed as he remembered the scene of the morning, as though it were in the bounds of human possibility that he could care for a woman of her type.

'My Agatha is an angel,' he said to himself; 'the light of Heaven is on her face, the stars are not so clear and true as her dear eyes; the other is a Parisian coquette, a stage queen.'

And as he stood listening to the rich voice, he thought of his innocent young love.

Ah! thank Heaven, she would never know he had grown to respect her innocence and purity so greatly that he could not bear to think of the wrong done to her. If it could have been undone, he would have undone it. The only thing that he could do now was to keep her in the same state of ignorance and innocence.

Ah! sweet Agatha, who was like her? Who had hair of such lovely gold, lips so dainty and sweet? Who was like her?

He walked slowly back to the house. She would be in her room. He looked everywhere, but could not find her; he went through the suite of rooms, but saw nothing of her. He did not go into his own. Once he fancied he heard her footsteps in the outer hall, and he hastened to her with a joyful cry.

It was only the wind stirring the great vine leaves; there was no Agatha. In her dressing room he saw her dinner dress all prepared—the light blue velvet, embroidered with seed pearls, and the beautiful suit of pearls to match.

Still he could not find her. The inmates of the house were summoned and a strict search instituted; but it was useless.

Suddenly he remembered what Agatha said she was going to read—to finish '*Les Miserables*.' In all probability, if he could find the book, he should find her. He looked where he had seen it that morning, but it was gone nor could he find it. He went to the spot where the tall myrtles grew, he called this time aloud:

'Agatha! Agatha!'

There was no reply—no sound, save the evening breeze as it rustled in the leafy branches. But under the garden chair he saw a book, and when he picked it up it was '*Les Miserables*.' So that she must have been reading, and have dropped her book. But where was she?

'If we were in Greece, I should think she had been stolen by brigands. It is just as though she had come out here this morning, and had never been seen since.'

This time he left no nook or corner unsearched, but he could find no Agatha.

Again as he went round to the western side of the house he heard the rich tones of the magnificent voice singing a popular air. There was something of subtle triumph in the notes.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

'YOU HAVE MURDERED HER.'

**I**F once during his excitement he had thought of going into his own room, the mystery would have been explained to him, but he never thought of it; he was hurried, excited, eager to have some intelligence of her, so that the envelope, with its inclosure, remained untouched. He was absent with the men-servants for two hours, searching the grounds, during which the sun set and the fair green earth was wrapped in silence and darkness, the waters of the lake were hushed and still, there was no sound—look where they would there was no sign of Agatha.

It was quite dark when they reached home; the moon and stars had not yet risen. Sir Vane was beside himself with wonder and alarm.

Then that happened which soon brought the terrible truth home to Sir Vane. He was going to Lucerne, and he went to his room in search of a warmer overcoat. By this time his alarm and anxiety had increased; now he knew that there was something wrong—something had happened to Agatha—but it had never occurred to him that she had left him of her own accord.

The lamps were lighted; everything was ready for him. Almost the first thing that he saw when he entered the room was the white envelope, pinned on the toilet cushion. In one moment the truth flashed across him. A great fear came over him. Surely she had not found out the truth; if so?—

Great drops gathered on his forehead. He took the letter, with a low moan, opened it, and found the enclosure.

He read Agatha's letter first. Oh, Heaven! *she knew*, and she had gone, she had left him forever!

He was stunned at first, and could hardly realize the words of the letter—that mademoiselle had shown her the enclosed. Then he understood that he had to read the enclosed. He

read it word for word—his own story, written by this cruel, treacherous hand. As he read, the veins upon his forehead swelled until they stood out like great cords ; his eyes literally flashed fire, his strong hands were clenched.

‘If I knew the hound who had written that, I would thrash his life out of him!’ he said, aloud. ‘Oh, my Agatha, my beautiful, loving Agatha! It has killed her, I know.’

His first thought was for her—her anguish, her sorrow, her desolation, her despair. Reading these cruel, haunting words by the light of her pure and innocent eyes, he knew she could never look up again ; that they would crush her and kill her.

He was a selfish man, but in that moment he would have given his life to have saved her from the knowledge. His own face burned with a crimson flush as he read the words. How horrible they were! What must that poor child have felt as she read them—what shame, what humiliation? so great that she had gone out, he felt sure, to die.

Of all the revelations of his forebodings nothing could have been so horrible as this. At first his thoughts were all for her—for what she had suffered, for the shame and sorrow that had overwhelmed her. In that moment he hated and loathed himself ; he saw his cruelty, his deceit, his treachery in their true light, and he hated himself.

What would she think of him, now that she knew what he had done to her? He had killed this innocent child by the most cruel of deaths. He had never intended her to know ; he had meant to keep her in utter ignorance, far from the world, a beautiful flower and blooming in solitude, and blooming only for him. Now she would know that the man she had loved so dearly was a villain, and, knowing it, she had gone out to die.

If he could but strike dead the one who had written these words! Who could have written it?—who knew his story?—to whose interest had it been to strike this blow to the fair and gentle girl who had never injured any one?—why had it been done?

Above all, who had shown to her how fiendish he had been? Mademoiselle, of course. This wicked letter had been written to her, and she had taken it to Agatha. Why had she not brought it to him, or have taken it to madame? Why have taken it to her?

While he had been away in the sunshine she had been slain. How little he had dreamed that he was leaving her for this. He began to see through the motive; it was Valerie who had given that letter to Agatha, and the motive was jealousy.

'I must have been mad,' he said, 'ever to have spoken to the girl. I will see what she means by it.'

Five minutes later he was standing in the *salon* with the two letters on the table before him, looking very erect, very proud and indignant; a darkening frown on his handsome face; his brow knitted; such stern determination on his lips as was seldom seen there.

'Ask Mademoiselle d'Envers if she will come to me, at once?' he said.

Valerie rallied all her force, and stood before him, bright, defiant, yet with an assumption of compassion.

'Dear Mr. Heriot,' she began, but the words died on her lips.

One look at his face showed that her cause was lost—at least for the present.

Then she saw that fatal letter on the table, and she knew in one moment what had happened. She knew that she ought to have destroyed it when Agatha had read it. And she wondered, when she stood there, how she could have been so mad as to give it to her. Of course she could not tell how things would turn out. She expected to go back to Agatha; she had not said all she wished, and while she was absent it seemed to her that Agatha might as well read that letter again and impress it on her mind.

She never dreamed that she would show it to Sir Vane—she would rather have slain her a hundred times over than that. What a fatal oversight it was! She had ruined herself by it, but she must face it now.

Those dark eyes of Sir Vane's, so terrible in their anger, were fixed upon her face, and quick as a flash of lightning she decided upon her course of proceeding.

'Will you be kind enough,' he said sternly, 'to tell me what you know of this cruel, foul, treacherous letter?'

'What letter?' she asked, and certainly if ever the face of a beautiful woman expressed innocent surprise, hers did.

'Will you look at it and see?' he replied, curtly.

She would sooner have touched a live snake, or an adder, but she dare not disobey him. She raised it slowly, then affected to find out suddenly what it was.

'Why this is *my* letter!' she said, and her face fell. No actress could have grasped the situation better. 'Oh, Mr. Heriot, how sorry I am that it has been shown to you!'

'Your letter,' he retorted. 'Yes, I see that the vile concoction has been addressd to you. How dare you show it to my —' He was going to say wife, but his conscience smote him, and the word died on his lips. 'How dare you show it to that innocent girl?'

'Have I done wrong, Mr. Heriot?' she asked. 'I am so sorry. I had no thought—no idea—'

'Nonsense!' he cried. 'You must have known that that letter would either kill her or drive her mad.'

She struck her white hands together, and looked most imploringly at him.

'Do not be angry!' she cried. 'I would not grieve you, or vex you, or annoy you, for the whole world. If you look at me in that way I shall die!'

She covered her face with her hands, and seemed to tremble; but it was too late for all these affectations—Sir Vane's anger was aroused.

'I want to know,' he said, 'when you received that letter, why you did not bring it to me?'

'I—I—dare not!' she said.

'I can believe,' he replied, 'that you were afraid to bring such a thing to me. My wonder is that you were not more afraid to show it to a young, innocent, tender-hearted girl. Do you know what you have done in showing her that letter? You have *murdered* her!'

'I am sorry,' she said, with drooping eyes—'I am more sorry than words can tell. I meant no harm; the letter said she was to be told. I did not know it was so very wrong. You must not be angry with me, or I shall die!'

'The pity is,' he said, bitterly, 'that you did not die before.'

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## CHAPTER XXXIV.

' I HAVE MADE A TERRIBLE MISTAKE.'



ALERIE D'Envers raised her head in wonder. 'You would sooner that I were dead. Oh, Mr. Heriot, you cannot mean that.'

'I do mean it,' he said. 'What right had you to show that letter to a girl? It is no compliment to you that any person, man or woman, could indite such a letter to you. It shows plainly that the writer has no respect for you, but that he or she considers you, to say the least of it, a woman of the world, to whom nothing is sacred, nothing is innocent, nothing pure. Thank Heaven, no one would have written such a letter to her.'

'How can I help it?' she said. 'It is not my fault.'

'I do not say that it is; but it shows the writer's appreciation of you. Had a quarter of those things been written to Agatha, she would not have understood them. You, I must say, have a singular knowledge of that which you ought not even to understand.'

The tone of sarcasm hurt her more than any reproach could have done; she felt at once how much she had fallen in his esteem—she saw that, in his mind, she was far below Agatha, and must regain that place before she could make any progress.

'I see now,' she said, with an air of pretty contrition, 'that I have done wrong. I am so sorry now that I did not bring it to you; indeed I meant to do no harm. The letter was most emphatically written, "I must show it to her," said I, "and explain it to her." I thought I was doing right. I do not see how you can blame me. You cannot ignore my share of interest in the matter. If it be true—and you do not deny it——'

He interrupted her:

'Why should I deny it to you?' he cried.

'If it be true,' said she, looking at him, with bright, fearless eyes, 'then you had no right to intrude such a person on my aunt and myself; it is cruel to her and cruel to me.'



'I do not wish to hurt your feelings,' he said, 'but I am confident of one thing—Agatha is an angel of innocence and light compared to you! She has the transparent mind of a child.'

'So it seems,' she said, but her face flushed hotly. 'No matter what I am, I have kept my place among pure and good women—she has lost hers.'

He restrained himself by a great effort. Even his lips became white with rage.

'You take too much for granted,' he said. 'What right have you to assume that this miserable letter is true? It may be a tissue of contemptible lies.'

'I know it is true,' she said, 'and so do you. As a gentleman and a so-called man of honor, you cannot deny it. You know that you are Sir Vane Heriot Carlyon, of Garswood; you know that the person you have brought here and introduced as your wife is Agatha Brooke, only a doctor's daughter. You know that you deceived her most cruelly, and that she believed herself to be your wife. She would not have left Whitecroft, but that she believed herself to be your wife.'

His face grew paler and paler with suppressed passion, his eyes flamed on her dauntless face.

'Will you tell me,' he cried, 'what business this is of yours?'

'I will,' she replied. 'It would have been no business of mine if you had taken her elsewhere. As you have brought her here under my aunt's roof, it becomes my business at once. I say that you have taken an unwarrantable liberty, and one quite unworthy of an English gentleman, in bringing such a person under my roof. You would not have taken her to your own mother or sister.'

'I am quite sure I should have done so,' he cried.

'Then, pardon me, you would have married her first,' she interrupted; 'and I must remind you that my aunt's family is quite as good as your own—mine, on my father's side, I should say, much better; and I have a right to complain when I find you have made so little of our house.'

He had no reply to make.

'I do not see,' continued Valerie, 'that you have anything to complain about. I think the right to complain lies with us.'

In all good faith my aunt takes you in—she is one of the proudest women in Switzerland—and you deceive her by bringing a person of that description here. Then I am told of it—told to question the person herself, and find from her it is all true. Agatha Brooke told me the story of her most foolish incredulity, of her simple folly. If she had not told me, I should never have thought that any girl could be so absurdly and easily deceived.'

'She told you the truth, did she? And now, I suppose, she has gone to die because she believes herself unworthy to live.'

'I do not know—I know nothing of her.'

'Will you tell me what passed between you?' he asked.

Ah! if she dared she would gladly have told him that the woman he loved lay a crushed, helpless heap at her feet.

'There was little enough,' she said. 'I gave her the letter, and she read it through. She cried bitterly, and then she told me the whole history of her marriage, and I told her how basely she had been deceived. As I told you before, my aunt sent for me while we were talking, and I went.'

'And you mean to tell me that my loving, innocent darling read those bitter, wicked words?'

'You should have married her, Sir Vane, if you intended her to keep her fair name.'

'You took a base and cowardly advantage of my absence,' he said. 'You ought not to have dared to have shown it to her, but to have waited for me. You forget how indignant and injured I feel.'

Her whole face changed, her dark eyes grew glorious in their softened light, her lips quivered; she went nearer to him, and held out her hand.

'Ah, forgive me, if I have done wrong,' she said, softly; 'I thought of you, only of you. I did not remember her or anything else, but you, only you. If I committed an error, can you not forgive it, when it was love for you? Perhaps—Heaven help me!—perhaps I was not altogether sorry to know that you were free.'

The voice in which she whispered the words was so sweet, the beautiful face she raised to him so bewitching in its loveliness, he would have been more than mortal if he had resisted her. She saw his softened expression, and she knew that she

had gained some influence, she knew that she had chosen the right path.

'If you knew,' she whispered, 'I am so sorry. I have made a terrible mistake all through love of you, but I will give my life to undo it—I will do everything in the world to help you. If it were any man in this wide world but you I should hate and loathe him! Ah, me, I cannot help loving you; do not be angry with me. If you are vexed with me there will be no light in the wide world for me. Say you forgive me.'

He relented visibly; he had been terribly angry with her, but if she meant no harm, if she had thought only of him, if she had not been altogether sorry to find him free, he could not be so angry.

'I cannot say that I forgive you,' he said: 'I must know more of what you have done. At first sight it seems unpardonable. What am I to say to madame?' he asked, abruptly.

'What you will,' she replied.

'I must tell her something of the truth,' he continued.

'For your own sake,' she said, 'I advise you not. I should give any explanation that occurs to you, but certainly *not* the truth; my aunt would never forgive you, and it will make her miserable her whole life-long.'

'Did she, Agatha, tell you where she was going, or what she was going to do?'

'No, not one word; I would tell you if I had the faintest notion.'

He began to pace up and down the room, the frown and perplexity deepening on his face. He did not in the least know what to do.

Valerie went to the table with the intention of reclaiming her letter. He held out his hand.

'Do not take that,' he said; 'it may be valuable evidence to me another day.'

'It is *my* letter,' she said.

'Yes, but you have given it out of your hands,' he replied.

A few more turns up and down the room, then he stopped abruptly. 'Valerie,' he said, 'I must find her—I could not live without her. I shall go to Paris to-night; it is useless looking for her here. I shall go to Paris and employ the cleverest agents the secret police have. I must find her, even if it takes my whole life; and when I find her I will marry her.'

She was vexed at the words ; she had not thought he would take it in this way. She had half fancied that he would be relieved ; now she saw that he was the most miserable of men. No arts or blandishments of hers were of the least use now ; the only thing was to efface herself, as it were, for the present.

' I must find her,' he said ; ' and if it takes every hour of my life and the whole of my fortune, I will find the writer of this letter, even if only to slay him.'

She looked at him with startled eyes, and he saw the start. An idea came to him, of which he did not speak then, but which was afterward realized.

' I shall go at once,' and catch the express from Lucerne ; and I shall be in Paris soon enough. I will not go by Basle.'

' But not now,' she said ; ' you cannot go now.'

' I must. I could not stay in this place where my darling has been murdered. If I were to stay here another hour it would drive me mad.'

Her face grew quite colorless, and she went to him with pleading eyes.

' Do not go. I could not bear it,' she said, and her voice died with a sob. ' Do not go.'

' I must. It is your fault,' he cried.

' But she may return—she may write to you, and you will not be here.'

' I shall leave my address with madame, who can forward any letters or telegrams to me. I could not stay here ; every room would be haunted by her. I should see and hear her everywhere. I am not heartless enough for that.'

' Do think of me,' she said. ' What shall I do if you go ?'

' Much the same as you did before I came ! You have never in your life done a more cruel deed than when you broke that girl's heart with that letter. I will ring for madame.'

She caught his hand between her own.

' Let me speak to you,' she cried. ' Do not be so cold, so cruel to me. I shall die if you leave me in this way.'

And she fell to weeping bitter tears, which angered him still more.

' My time is too precious to waste in these scenes,' he said.

' Had you not better retire before I see madame ?'

' You will not tell her ?' she gasped.

'No; I will not betray you as you have done me,' he said. Then, without another word, he rang the bell and asked for madame.

There was nothing for Valerie but to hasten to her room.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

## A LADY VISITOR.

**I** HAVE news of my wife, madame' said Sir Vane, when that astonished and much-trying lady came before him—'very bad news, too.'

'I am sorry to hear it,' replied madame.

'My wife has left me,' he continued, 'under a mistake—a great, grave, terrible mistake. I hope to set everything right and to find her; for that reason I am going away to-night.'

'It is sudden,' said madame; but you are quite right. I am very much grieved for you, Mr. Heriot.'

'Give me five minutes, madame,' he continued. 'My wife had left a letter for me. I did not find it until I went into my room. She tells me why she has gone, but not where; and I am going to find her. I will leave here everything that belongs to us, for we may return. I will, with your permission, arrange our pecuniary matters now.'

Money was nothing to him; Agatha was everything. He placed a check in madame's hand, and she gave a little cry when she saw the amount.

'This is too much,' she said; 'I cannot take it, Mr. Heriot.'

'Pardon me if I insist,' he replied. 'I should have remained here another year but for this. My wife may return here. I should like to keep everything just as it is for a year. And I will leave you my address. Promise to send to me by your own hands—not to trust to any others—all the letters or telegrams that may come.'

'I promise,' said madame, affected to tears by his generosity and her sorrow for him.

After a few more minutes of conversation Sir Vane looked at his watch.

'I must go,' he said; 'I have no time to spare.'

'Will you not wait to say good-bye to my niece?' she cried, aghast at this sudden break-up of a seemingly happy party.

'I cannot,' he said; 'I must leave it, madame, for you to do for me. Pray make my adieux to mademoiselle.'

Ten minutes afterward he had left the chateau; the groom was to follow with the horses and all that he required. The address that he left was:

'Sir Vane Carlyon, Hotel du Nord, Paris.'

If madame thought anything of the name, she made no comment.

Before sunset the next day the groom, with the horses and all Sir Vane's belongings, had quitted the Bellefleurs, and the silence and solitude were broken no more.

The surprise and dismay did not last long. Everything is excused to a rich baronet—even his sins are known by a gentle and tender name. Valerie bided her time; she had overreached herself, and she saw it now. Her letter was a work of art, but her error in placing it in Agatha's hands had been fatal; she had that false step to retrieve, and she could only bide her time.

There was nothing to be done at present; however hard his words and thoughts, she must not resent them; she must appeal always to his love, pity and vanity; then she felt that she should succeed. She bore it for one week, then she could bear it no longer; she was miserable; she found that she loved Sir Vane with the whole passionate love of her heart; that life without him was not worth living. She was bitterly disappointed at the result of what she felt to be a very clever intrigue. Nothing could have been better than Agatha's disappearance, leaving him so free and unfettered: but all that was nothing while he persisted in searching for her.

He would never find her; she felt persuaded that Agatha meant what she said, that she would never look upon his face again. Valerie felt almost sure that she had sought and found death. But it was not Agatha of whom she thought now, but herself. She had played good cards, and yet had spoiled her game, and now she had awoke, and a strong, sudden sense of

her own fate came over her. She had not known, while Sir Vane was with her, how entirely and completely she loved him; she knew it now; she knew that life without him would be unendurable; that she could not bear it; that she must see, hear and be with him, or she must die.

In her blind folly she would not look at the truth; she would not remember the bitter things he had said to her. She flattered herself they meant nothing. He was angry and excited when he had said them. But she let her mind brood, and her thoughts dwell on the other words—all the tender, whispered nothings that had in them no sense.

Over those she brooded until she lost her common sense. She would not bring her reason to bear upon them at all. She brooded over them until she persuaded herself that Sir Vane really loved her. He had been obliged to show some sorrow at the loss of Agatha; but that would all vanish when she went to him. Her passionate, ill-disciplined nature had never known any control. She was not likely to exercise it now, when, for the first time, she loved with her whole heart.

She could bear it no longer. The long days that never brought him; the suns that set, the suns that rose without any news of him; the longing that was eating her heart away—it was living death. She could not endure it. And she shuddered when she thought what the hapless girl who had rapturously loved him must have suffered.

'Aunt,' said Valerie to madame, 'of course Mr. Heriot left his address with you?' This was a few days after his departure. "There is a packet of letters for him from England, and one is marked 'immediate,' shall I send them for you?"

'If you will, my dear,' said madame, only too glad to be relieved of the trouble.

Since these events happened she had not been so strong or so well. Valerie had not liked openly, and without reason, to ask for his address. It would have looked suspicious; but she gladly availed herself of this opportunity. Madame gave it to her.

'Sir Vane Carlyon, Hotel du Nord, Paris.'

Valerie looked at madame.

'Aunt,' she said, 'do you not think it strange that your English lodger should have two names?'

'I cannot say so,' she answered. 'I never attempt to understand the English. I have heard of such things before, though. People of rank often lay aside their titles and travel incognito—it is to save trouble, and secure a little peace, I imagine. I have often thought this Sir Vane—how strange a name—was an aristocrat. It is curious to think that gentle, quiet girl who loved solitude was Lady Carlyon.'

Valerie's face flushed. It was on her lips to cry out that she was not Lady Carlyon, but she restrained herself; it would never do to let her aunt know that she had any share in the affair.

She forwarded the letters, waited a few days longer, then told her aunt that she had received an invitation from an old schoolfellow who had just married and gone to Vienna, and she should probably be absent for some time.

Madame, who never attempted to control or influence her niece, sighed with a sense of relief. After all, she thought, she should not be sorry to have the whole place to herself and recover from her fatigue.

Valerie went away, and madame was alone. She thought a great deal of the fair, angelic girl who had so suddenly disappeared. She wondered what was the 'great and grave mistake' Sir Vane had spoken about. Every family has its skeleton, every life its hidden side, every heart its pain.

Madame wept more than once over the fate of the beautiful girl whom she had really loved.

More than once, too, she grew nervous when the evening shadows fell, and fancied she could see a white shape moving between the trees—fancied she heard the wailing of a woman's voice—fancied that she could hear light footsteps along the floor and the faint rustle of a woman's dress—but never again did madame see Agatha Brooke.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sir Vane had been for some days at the hotel, and already he was beginning to tire. The vehemence of his sorrow was fading. He felt the loss; he was lonely, disconsolate, and would have given his whole fortune to have found her, but it did not seem likely.

Knowing nothing of the purse in her pocket, he had told the clever and astute agents of the secret police, that she had left



home without money. Then they said if that were the case, she could not have left Lucerne.

His own opinion was that she had drowned herself in the lake. She was so gentle, so helpless, so unfit to find her way, he began to feel quite sure that she had wandered down to the lake, and was lying underneath the waters. Ah, fair, sweet Agatha, better so, a thousand times, than living with the sword of burning fire in your heart—better a thousand times.

In those days no smile was ever seen on his face; he wandered like an unquiet spirit; he could find no rest, no enjoyment, no repose. Agatha's face was never out of his mind; he could tell what she had suffered. Poor, gentle child, she had seemed unwilling at first to believe him when he told her that by virtue of his promise, she was indeed his wife. He remembered her anxious, wistful face, and her sudden resolution to trust him in all. This was how her trust had ended—in betrayal, and perhaps in death. He had loved other women, and had left them; but he had never been haunted by any sad memories of them—he had forgotten them.

'This is the one love of my life,' he said to himself over and over again. The more he regretted Agatha, the more he hated Valerie—all his sorrow and unhappiness were caused by her. It was she who had brought it all on him. He hated her; he could not endure to think how she had taken advantage of his absence to give this death-wound.

There came one evening more unbearable to him than any other had been yet. He was possessed by the picture of a woman drowning; he could fancy the fair hair caught by reeds and water-lilies; he could fancy a white, beautiful face raised to the moonlit sky, white hands beating the waters, then lying so still—wherever he went this picture was with him. He wiped the great drops of perspiration from his brow, and he cried out once—

'If this be the punishment of a sinner, I would that I had been, a saint.'

He went to the most brilliant *cafes* in Paris to dine, but he could eat nothing. He went to the opera, but left it, he could not bear the music. He went to his room at the hotel, a bright, cheerful sitting-room, beautifully furnished, on the first floor;


he sat there, the very picture of despondency, when one of the waiters came to him and said that a lady wished to see him.

'A lady,' he repeated, 'ask her to come here. Heavens! it is Agatha! Agatha! come back to me.'

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CHAPTER XXXVI.

' I WILL GIVE YOU CAUSE TO REMEMBER ME.'

SK her to come up here at once,' he cried, and the bewildered waiter looked at him, in frightend wonder. Why did he start from his chair in that frantic manner, and stand looking so white, wild, and agitated?

'A lady,' he repeated; 'an English lady, tall and fair, with golden hair? Make haste; do not keep her waiting. Good heavens! I shall go mad with delight. I will ask her, on my knees, to marry me, and—so help me, Heaven!—I will be a good man; I will indeed.'

He never thought of Valerie. She was far from his mind, The whole world to him was Agatha—no one but Agatha.

The frightened waiter answered.

'I do not know, monsieur; I cannot tell. The lady is veiled.'

'It is my Agatha. Good heavens! how grateful I am. It is to me as though she were given back from the dead.

He was blind and dazed; it seemed to him a miracle that Agatha should come back. He staggered rather than walked to the door, hungering, thirsting for one look at her. Up the wide staircase, with its crimson carpets, its marble statues, its wealth of green plants, came a tall, slender figure. He could not see distinctly, for his eyes were dimmed with tears. Ah, thank Heaven, she was not lying under the dark waters of the lake.

He tried to speak to her, but his lips were stiff, and could articulate no sound; a blood-red mist seemed to hang over

him. He caught her arm, and drew her into the room. He clasped her in his arms, he covered her face and hands with passionate kisses, he murmured the wildest words of love and welcome to her; he was quite mad and beside himself with joy.

'My darling, my love! Thank Heaven you have come back to me, my love, my wife!'

She was strangely still. She trembled in the strong clasp of those strong arms; a gleam of light from the lamps fell on the face and head. Surely the hair falling in a rippling mass down her shoulders was black. He gave a little cry.

It was Valerie—not Agatha. He had thought to gather Agatha to his heart, and to atone to her by his passionate love, and instead, it was the woman who had been her murderess who was lying in his arms.

She knew there was no hope for her when she heard that cry; it froze her very heart.

'You!' he cried, with a great oath, flinging her from him—  
'"you!" What brings you here?'

She stood for a few minutes, a silent, beautiful embodiment of despair.

'What brings you here?' he cried.

'My love for you, and your promise to me,' she replied.

'What promise?' he asked, curtly.

'You said that if you had met me first you should have married me; you promised that if ever you met me and were free you would marry me. I am here to claim your love, and remind you of your promise.'

He muttered something between his teeth—hard words she knew; but as this was her last card, she decided to play it well. She would keep her patience and courage while they were of any use to her, and then it would be war to the knife.

'You do not call that kind of fooling a promise,' he said.  
'It was your seeking. Any man would have said the same thing when a woman urged him. You know, and I know, it was only sentimental nonsense. We laughed at each other.'

'I know this one thing,' she said, 'I loved you with all my heart then, as I do now.'

'That is not my fault,' he retorted, 'Great Heaven, what pain you have given me. Why did you come here? I thought it was Agatha.'

'Listen to me,' she said, impressively, laying her hand on his arm—'nay, be patient and listen. I love you a thousand times better than that baby-girl was capable of loving,' she went on, in a tone of deep emotion, the tears standing like pearls on her beautiful lashes. 'I would go through fire for you. I am not a foolish school-girl, I am a woman of talent and power. I could make a worthy helpmate to a man like you; I could help you to be famous—think of it; above all, I love you so dearly and so well that I would give my life for you. Do you hear, Sir Vane?' she said, passionately—'my very life I would give for you and think it but little.'

There was pathos in the ring of her voice, passionate love in the expression of her face. He felt that it was true, and not feigned.

'This is hardly the time for talking nonsense,' he replied. 'I do not wish to seem inhospitable, but I should be greatly relieved if you would go. I—I thought it was Agatha, and I am unnerved—I am not myself.'

The passion deepened in her face, but something of anger mingled with her emotion.

'I might,' she said, 'have expected this kind of language from you, yet, strange to say, I did not. I will know my fate. Were all the words you said to me false?—were all the promises false? Did you not mean what you said?'

'Not one word,' he replied, scornfully, 'and you know it. You are a practised coquette, though you are but a young girl, and you know that it was merely pastime. You cared nothing for me, nor I for you.'

When she looked up at him her dark eyes were swimming with tears.

'I do not know how it began,' she said. 'I only know how it was ended; and that is, in my deepest love and devotion to you.'

'Of course I am grateful,' he said, impatiently; 'but I do not want it. It is quite useless to me.'

'You said you loved me, Sir Vane.'

'Now, be reasonable, Valerie; you can when you choose. What can a man do when a beautiful woman follows him, as you did me? You will own that you did; it was never I who sought you. What did you do? You followed me in my

walks ; you sought me when I was alone ; you threw yourself in my way ; you made the most of your beautiful face and your glorious voice. You may have charmed my senses, but you have never touched my heart, and never will.'

For one moment, the tall, graceful figure swayed to and fro, and the brilliant, proud face grew white as death.

'You should spare me,' she said, 'because I love you. You of all people in the world, should be kind to me.'

'I am not unkind,' he replied ; 'but I protest against this sentimental nonsense. I will have no mention of love, because it does not exist. It was all a piece of acting, Valerie, and I played second to your first. You—even you—cannot be so absurd as to think the few sentimental scenes that were enacted in that garden had any meaning ?'

'They had to me,' she said, faintly.

'They had none to me. To tell you the real truth,' he added, with brutal frankness, 'I always laughed at them, even the most tender points, they were so ridiculous—so got up ; and I assure you that I always went back to Agatha loving her doubly for her fair, sweet innocence.'

A red flush covered that beautiful face. This was more than she could bear.

'You *laughed* at me,' she said, fiercely.

'Of course I did. You must have laughed at yourself, Valerie.'

'Unfortunately, I did not. But I will answer for one thing—you shall never laugh at me again. I will give you such cause to remember myself and my name—that though you may curse me, you will never laugh at me.'

'Now do not be tragic, Valerie, and let us end this unpleasant interview. I will tell you the exact truth about yourself. I admire your beauty—every one must do that. I admire your talent, although I think you are an *intriguante*, and not to be trusted. Still—truth is best—you are one of the last women in the world I should ever love. I knew your type years ago, and tired of such women as you. Listen one moment longer. If I had admired, esteemed, loved you, I should hate you more, because of what you have done to Agatha—for that alone—although I forgive you, because you say you meant no harm—for that I shall always like you less than any person I know.'

'That is your real meaning and decision,' she said, calmly.

'Yes,' he replied, 'and I should like to enforce it—to make it as emphatic as I can.'

'I thank you—I quite understand—there is no need. I shall waste no time in abuse. But I tell you this to your face, Sir Vane—you are the most disloyal, dishonorable man who ever went by the name of gentleman. Perhaps from this you may learn a lesson *not* to trifle with women. You have trifled with me. You saw that I was inclined to admire and like you, and you enjoyed the incense offered to your vanity. I grant that I was greatly to blame in letting you know that I loved you. You were still more to blame in accepting that love and homage. Why were you true to one thing for once in your life? Why did you not say plainly that you loved Agatha, and Agatha only, and that no other woman had any interest for you?'

'It would have been better, I admit,' he said.

'You see what it has led to. You led me on until I cared enough for you to do anything which would win you to myself.'

'What did you do?' he asked curiously.

She knew now that her game was lost; that never would her hopes and dreams be realized. Sir Vane was dead to her; but he should never laugh at her again; he should take his punishment with him.

'You shall never laugh at me again,' she said, 'never. I will tell you what I did. I wrote that letter, and addressed it to myself.'

She had expected him to grow half-mad with anger and indignation; but to her surprise, he merely shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

'To tell you the truth, mademoiselle,' he said, 'I more than suspected it. It was so entirely like you, and so worthy of you. Well, you have done your worst with an anonymous letter. It was a good shot; and it took effect—right through your rival's heart. Oh, gentle, womanly hands, that could do such a deed! Oh, rare and womanly heart that could plan it.'

His lips worked nervously, and his eyes grew livid.

'I said that if ever I found out the writer of that letter, I would slay him. You are not even worth my anger; but you have my infinite contempt, as one who stabs in the dark.'

'It seems to me that your contempt is better and less dangerous than your love,' she said curtly.

'So you wrote the letter? You are a clever woman, Valerie, and the idea is worthy of a French play. Would you mind telling me how you secured your information, which I admit to be perfectly correct? I should really like to know.'

She told him in a few words.

His look of anger softened into contemptuous admiration.

'You are a clever woman, Valerie, wonderfully clever. I admire your talents, I admire your courage; but I would not advise you to exercise them in this fashion again.'

'I have wounded you; I have hurt you; I have reached you at last,' she said.

'By a very clumsy weapon—an anonymous letter,' he said; 'the fittest instrument for such a deed.'

And for several minutes there was silence between them.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### A WOMAN SCORNEO.



AND Valerie and Sir Vane seemed to measure each other's strength in that one long, silent glance. The tug of war had come.

'I think,' said Valerie, 'that however greatly you may be tempted, you will never laugh at me again. I have more to tell you.'

'You had better be careful,' said Sir Vane; 'I feel something almost like murder rising in my heart.'

'I wish it were murder, and you would kill me,' she said; 'I should welcome death from your hands.'

'I would not kill you,' he said; 'I think the heaviest punishment for you will be to live. What more have you to tell me?'

'Only this: That I took my letter to your fair-faced Agatha, and I read it to her word by word, slowly and impressively, so

that she might understand it ; and when I had finished, she read it, word for word, herself. It may make you more pitiful to women to know how it affected her—it killed her ! If ever a smile comes to her face again, it will be more wonderful than the standing still of the sun. She fell at my feet, and she lay there a crushed, heart-broken woman. She told me that she would go away from you and never look at your face again. She told me, also, that if you knelt to beg her to marry you she would not now ; so that even should you find her, you will have no chance.'

'You can leave that part of the business with me,' he said. 'If, or, rather, *when* I find her, that will be all right.'

He spoke calmly, but his face was as pale as that of a corpse.

If she had been a man her life would not have been worth a moment's purchase.

'I was very sorry for her,' she continued. 'I do not think any woman ever suffered so much. Her face became ghastly white, and she looked like one who had a sword right in her heart. I was sorry for her, but it was highly necessary that she should understand her position.'

How he restrained himself he never knew ; afterward, when he recalled this interview, his great wonder was that he had not killed her ; it seemed to him a miracle.

He made no answer to her taunts, but they made him feel as he had never felt before.

'Let this be ended now,' he said. 'You have done your worst, now go.'

'I go,' she replied. 'Women have spoiled you, Sir Vane ; you have made toys of them—they have given you blessings instead of curses. I am of different metal, and I intend to take my vengeance.'

'You are welcome to it,' he replied ; 'and—pardon me if I seem flippant—you can take as much as you like.'

'It seems little enough now,' she said ; 'but I will spoil your life—I will spend mine in watching yours, and at every turn I will spoil it. You remember, perhaps, certain words of Congreve, the poet :

"Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned  
Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned."

Keep them in your mind.'



'Why should you take vengeance on me?' he said. 'It is I who am wronged.'

'You have spoiled my life, and I hate you for it,' she cried, in a fury of passion. 'My love has turned to hate—I am all hate, and I bid you beware of my vengeance.'

'I am not in the least degree afraid of it,' he replied; and your manner of announcing it is worthy of the stage. And now, mademoiselle, you have confessed your intrigues, you have accused yourself, you have denounced me, you have sworn vengeance, all after the kind of a true tragedy queen; add to these favors one more—leave me in peace.'

'I will,' she said; 'but remember, the time shall come when you will fear my vengeance and fear me. Until then, farewell.'

She was gone—there was no time for another word. He saw the tall figure vanish down the broad staircase, and he went back to his room.

He was more unnerved, more unsettled than ever. He had partly suspected that she might have had something to do with that horrible letter; she was more wicked and desperate than he thought. And now he felt quite sure that Agatha was dead; she would be in despair; she would go down to the lake and throw herself in. No one had seen her since the servants saw her at the lake-side.

'Poor, pretty Agatha, he sighed, deeply.

It was the saddest ending to a pretty romance. Still it was of no use mourning over a woman who was dead; if she could have been living, and he could have found her, all well and good.

He was never constant for very long together; this had been by far the longest love of his life; now it was over there was an end of it, and it was of no use repining. He knew, he had always known, that if ever this knowledge reached her she would die of it.

It was a most unfortunate business, and he would have been more content to have laid her in some green English churchyard, than in the depths of the lake waters.

He was very depressed and unhappy for two or three weeks, so much so that he considered himself a model of constancy, and then he began to cheer up a little.

He met some English friends in Paris, and they spent some pleasant evenings together. Once more the love of fast life

took hold of him ; its false glare blinded him, and he could not believe that he had spent so many months in the solitude of Bellefleurs. He resolved on leaving Paris, and going home to England. There, in the midst of the whirl in which he had lived, he should forget all the sooner. He was dreadfully grieved and sorry ; but he did not feel at all as though his life was finished or marred—far from it. He had to live it.

So, after a few weeks, he returned to Garswood, and was soon plunged into the midst of business, politics, and gayety. He was even more handsome and attractive than ever ; quite as eagerly welcomed ; quite as much sought after. To be mistress of Garswood was still the desire of many a fair maiden's heart. There was only one thing which he could not do. He would not go to the Abbey when Lord Croft invited him.

He never ceased to love Agatha, and he never ceased to grieve over her ; but, as time passed, the impression grew less. It had only been one of many episodes in his life—it had been the whole of hers.

\* \* \* \* \*

The same evening that Agatha found her way to the porch of the hospital of St. John—one of the finest institutions in Paris, a sad accident happened to the young Count de Tiernay. He was returning with his mother, the beautiful and wealthy Countess de Tiernay, from a ball, when their carriage came in collision with a fiacre that was rapidly driven by a man not quite sober. He could never answer for the consequences, for he was killed at once.

The collision was of terrible force ; the horses were so seriously injured that they had to be shot. The two belonging to the Count were most valuable. The countess was thrown out but escaped uninjured. The count was flung with violence against the curb-stone, and lay there like one dead.

A crowd collected at once, and two gendarmes came to the scene. It was a curious sight to see that beautiful lady in her diamonds and magnificent dress kneeling on the pavement crying out that her son was killed. She would let no one raise the injured head but herself. She laid it on the soft satin folds of her dress.

'Find a doctor,' she cried, in most heart-rending tones. 'For Heaven's sake find a doctor'

A gentleman in the crowd went forward, and said :

'Madame, it might be half an hour before a doctor could be found and brought here; the hospital of St. John is just round the corner; the best plan will be to carry him there.'

'Do you think he is dead?' asked the lady.

The stranger placed his hand on the count's breast.

'He is not dead, madam; his heart is beating, though faintly. He may rally if he has immediate help, but not if he waits here until the doctor comes—in that case he must die.'

'Then, for Heaven's sake, let him be taken there!' she said, and it was done at once.

There was an instant stir in the crowd. A Frenchman seldom requires asking twice for help. The door of the carriage was taken quickly from the hinges; he was laid upon it. Several strong men came forward with offers of help, and he was carried quickly down the street to the hospital of St. John.

The countess walked by his side; she would not leave him for one moment. The usual crowd followed. It was not an uncommon, but a most picturesque procession—the wounded man, his mother, in all the splendor of her ball attire, the diamonds gleaming in the light of the lamps, her jewelled hands clasping one of her son's, the crowd, all agape with wonder, following.

There was the deep, old-fashioned porch, with the bright light shining, and the great crucifix hanging in the hall. They rang the bell, and while they waited for an answer, the countess saw the silent figure, with its white face and folded hands, lying on the seat. Even the stir of the crowd had not aroused Agatha from the deadly sleep of exhaustion. The countess went up to her.

'Dear Heaven!' she cried; 'what a face!—what a beautiful, angelic face! How did this girl come here?'

No one knew.

'She is a lady,' said the countess; 'and I fear she is dying. Bring some help for her. Oh, Heaven, what a night!—how full of misfortune and accident!'

In the confusion that ensued when the attendants hastened to answer the bell, they assumed naturally that the young girl lying on the seat belonged to the party. Agatha was carried into the hospital and taken to a room, and many hours elapsed before the truth was known.

The doctors examined the young count, and formed a favorable opinion of him ; he was not so severely injured as had been feared at first ; and when madame la countess, in her delight and gratitude, sat there weeping happy tears, one of the sisters came to inquire what should be done about the young lady, who did not seem to be injured, but who was very ill. The countess said, in surprise :

‘ We had no young lady with us.’ Then she remembered the beautiful face in the porch. ‘ She does not belong to us,’ said the countess, ‘ but I am so grateful to Heaven for its mercy, that, if she be in want or in need, I will take care of her.’

And that was how Agatha became the *protégé* of Madame la Countess de Tiernay.

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## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### THE CRY OF AN ANGUISHED HEART.

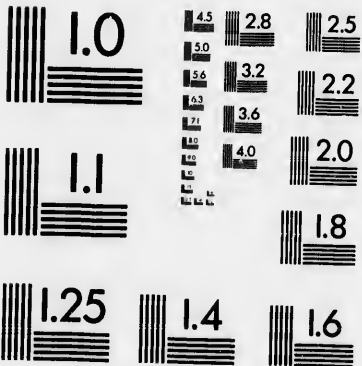
**M**ADAME la Countess de Tiernay was one of the wealthiest and most generous ladies in Paris. She had been one of the most famous court beauties, and had married the Count Tiernay, one of the richest and most celebrated men in France. Her life had been one long scene of brilliant enjoyment ; she was one of the most popular queens of French society—no one more beautiful or more sought after. While she was at the zenith of her happiness and prosperity her husband died, and the beautiful countess was left with this one son. She gave up the fashionable world then, and devoted her sole existence to her son ; and he, in his turn, was extremely fond and proud of his beautiful mother.

They went out together continually ; the young count was far prouder of taking his stately, handsome mother to a ball than of escorting the loveliest girl in Paris. Madame la Countess was most charitable ; it was one of her favorite virtues and occupations. It was said of her that no one ever appealed to



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her for help in vain. So that Agatha had fallen into good hands when she attracted the attention of Madame la Countess de Tiernay.

The result of the prolonged and repeated examination of the count was that his injuries were not fatal. Still, the most skilful doctors said it would be better for him to remain at the hospital for some days at least, lest the removal should injure him. The nursing of the hospital of St. John was carried on by a band of devoted sisters called 'the Sisters of the Red Cross,' a body of noble women, whose lives were devoted to good works. One of the kindest and sweetest among them, called Sister Angela, was placed in charge of the young girl found in the old stone porch. The Countess de Tiernay had been struck with Agatha's almost angelic beauty, and had asked the sisters to find a nice room for her; she was not to go into the wards where the great body of the patients lay—she was to be what is called a private patient—to have one of the pretty rooms that overlooked the gardens. She was to have every attention, every comfort, at madame's expense; and when she grew better, madame would see what was to be done. No one knew anything of her—no one had seen her enter the great stone porch where the wooden crucifix hung. Two or three of the sisters stood round the bed whereon they had laid her; no fairer picture was ever seen than this—the face, white and still as sculptured marble; the long, dark lashes lying on a pale cheek; the wealth of shining hair lying like a veil around her. They drew near to her, these good sisters, who seldom saw anything so fair. One touched the white hand, so cold and still—the others raised a tress of the golden hair.

'She is English,' said Sister Gertrude; 'a fair, beautiful English girl; her hair is like gold, and her face like a white rose.'

'She is so young,' said Sister Clare; 'and her face—ah, Madonna! how beautiful it is. I wonder if all the English ladies are like her?'

'Do you think she is a lady?' asked Sister Anna, who rather disliked and mistrusted the term.

Sister Clare raised again the white hand that lay outside the counterpane.

'Look, sister,' she said.

And one glance was enough. The beautiful, soft, white hand that lay there was certainly the hand of a lady.

'Look, too, at her dress,' said Sister Clare. 'Everything she wears is of the most costly description; her dress is torn and soiled as if by long walking; look at the dead leaves clinging to it, but it is of the finest description; look at this handkerchief, of the purest lace. Ah, indeed, dear sister, the poor thing is a lady.'

'It does not matter much,' said good Sister Gertrude, 'whether she is a lady or not; that is the last thing we need trouble about. Who or what she is does not concern us much, but what can we do for her? She is very ill.'

'She looks to me,' said Sister Anna, 'as though she would never open her eyes again,' and then the kindly sisters drew nearer in anxious dread.

'May Heaven pity her,' said Sister Clare. 'Surely she will not die without a word or a prayer. We must do something at once. Sister Anna, you will be the best to remain with her. Sister Gertrude, will you find Dr. Regnier at once?'

The sisters dispersed, each carrying away with her a vivid recollection of the beautiful English girl lying on what seemed to be a bed of death.

Then Dr. Regnier came, and looked astonished at the beautiful girl.

'Something serious,' he said, to Sister Anna.

He bent down over the pale face, he laid his hand on the girl's heart.

'She is alive,' he said, 'but this is a worse case than the young count's.'

He looked at the white face, and tried to raise one of the white eyelids.

'It is the brain,' he said to himself; 'I feared as much.'

'Most probably, sister,' he said aloud, 'this is the swoon that often precedes brain fever. It will go hard with her, poor child! Nothing is known of her, I suppose?'

'Nothing,' replied the sister. 'When they carried in monsieur le count, she was found just as you see her now, in the porch. The Countess de Tiernay has taken charge of her, as an act of gratitude, she says, for her son's almost miraculous escape from death.'



Suddenly the fair head stirred, and the beautiful eyes opened wide, with a vacant stare.

'Vane! Vane!' she cried, and the doctor looked at the sister. 'Vane! Vane!' she repeated, and the doctor, looking wisely at the sister, said:

'That is a name—an English name—Vane.'

'It is a droll one,' said the good sister, 'but these English, they are just a little droll; do you not think so?'

'You are right, sister; and now what had we better do? If we knew anything of her story or antecedents, it would guide us.'

'Vane, Vane!' cried the girl; and the golden head tossed wearily on the pillow. 'Vane, Vane!'

'Vane is a man's name,' said the doctor. 'Vane is certainly a man's name. Most probably a love story.'

'Vane, Vane!' she cried; and good Sister Anna shook her head.

'It will be long before he hears you, my child,' she said; but Agatha only looked at her with beseeching eyes, and uttered her usual cry:

'Vane, Vane!'

'Brain fever,' said the doctor, 'and it will be a bad case; but she is in good hands. You can do nothing more at present than use ice to the head.'

The sister took up the long golden hair in her hand, the kindly, loving heart shining out of her eyes.

'I hope this will not be cut off,' she said.

'We will save it if possible,' he replied.

'Vane, Vane!' cried the girl.

A burning flush mounted to her face; her eyes were full of wild burning light; the white hands beat the air helplessly; the golden head was tossed incessantly to and fro; the quick, rapid cry of 'Vane, Vane' never stopped.

'That will be trying,' said the doctor, as the voice reached to a scream of keen distress; 'it will be very trying for you, sister.'

'It is worse for her,' said the kindly woman—'much worse.'

But the time came when Sister Anna would have given anything for relief from that one piercing cry. It never ceased; at one time it was low and tender, then it rose into a prolonged wail of despair.

As the fever grew higher, she began to talk about other things. She lay and murmured something of a church—a fair faced saint with a palm-branch—of her mother's grave; but all ended in the cry for 'Vane.' She must have suffered terribly the sisters said.

'She has a fine, though delicate constitution, and the fight will be for dear life,' the doctor said.

The countess herself came often to the bedside, and more than once her eyes filled with tears as she heard that ever pathetic cry, 'Vane, Vane!'

Then came the time of recovery, when by degrees the cruel mist cleared away, and memory, more cruel still, came in its place. Good Sister Anna will never forget the day when the beautiful eyes looked in her own, and the weak voice asked:

'Sister, where am I?'

'In the Hospital of St. John, my child. Heaven be praised that you can speak sensibly.'

'Where? In what hospital?'

'You are in Paris, my dear,' answered the nun.

'Paris? I thought I lived by a lake,' she said. 'Paris! How did I come here?'

'I cannot tell you; we found you in the old stone porch.'

Slowly enough the memory of it came back to her. A stone porch, with a great crimson lamp burning. Ah! and a crucifix hanging on the wall. She could see the white face and the crown-thorned head. Why had she come there? Then she was in a railway train, travelling by night and by day with speed; and then she was standing on the terrace, with Valerie standing before her, and telling her, over and over again, that she had never been married, and she was not Vane's wife. She remembered it all then. She looked in the gentle face of the nun.

'Sister,' she said, 'do you think I am ill enough to die?'

'I hope not, my dear,' was the gentle answer.

'Oh, pray for me that I may die.' God hears the prayers of good people; pray that I may die.'

'Death is not always better than life,' said the sister. You differ from the last young girl whom I nursed.'

'Do I. In what way?' she asked, interested in what the sister was saying.

'Ah, my dear, she was a young girl, just like you, but French—not English; and the French are so emotional, you know, so quick. She had been in great trouble, and the doctor said he thought she would die. In the middle of the night I was sitting with her, and I shall never forget how I was startled at the time. A low voice broke the silence of the night.

'Sister', she said, 'pray Heaven that I may *not* die.'

'Why, my dear?' I asked. 'There are rest and peace in death.'

'There is something better in life,' she said. 'There is time for repentance. Pray for me that I may not die, but that I may live, and suffer, and repent.'

'You differ from her, my dear.'

'Yes,' replied Agatha.

But she took the lesson to heart, and never prayed again that she might die.

The day came when, to the great relief of madame, the count was able to be carried home.

Agatha, too, was recovering then, and had become a great favorite with all the good sisters. The impression that her beautiful natural character made upon them all was so good that no one ever suspected her, even ever so faintly, of the least wrong-doing.

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

'I HAVE BEEN SINNED AGAINST.'

**T**HE Countess de Tiernay sat alone in her magnificent boudoir, a room so luxuriously furnished that it might have been prepared for an empress. The room was a fit shrine for the handsome, stately woman who used it. The countess wore a dress of rich black velvet, trimmed with rare point lace; she wore diamond rings on her fingers, and a diamond brooch fastened the rich lace. She was thinking deeply. She had received a letter that morning from the sisters, saying

that the young English girl was now convalescent, and that her room was wanted for others. Would madame let them know what was to be done? The result of which was that the countess had written to ask if they would send the young lady to her. She would soon decide what was to be done. She was waiting for her now, and in a few minutes a servant ushered her into the room.

Madame looked at her in wondering admiration. She had only seen her twice, and each time she was under the influence of the fever. The sisters had done their best for her; they had purchased a plain black dress and bonnet—quaint and old-fashioned, but they made her look the more beautiful by contrast. The tall, slender figure, and pale, beautiful face were seen to greater advantage than would have been the case in any other dress. Madame noticed the air of distinction, the high-bred grace, the elegance of every attitude.

'This girl is a lady,' she said to herself—'a perfect lady.'

She smiled kindly, and held out her jewelled hand in greeting.

'I am pleased to see you, dear child,' she said. 'Come nearer to me.'

Agatha went up to her.

'I should like you to understand,' she said, gently, the source of my interest in you. I have an only son. Do you know what an only son is to the mother who adores him? I adore my son—he is the whole world to me. Some time since, as you know, we were returning from a ball together, and by some accident our carriage was nearly destroyed, and he was almost killed. He was taken to the hospital, and by the prompt kindly skill there displayed, his life was saved. You, poor child, had taken refuge there the same night, and when I heard of you I vowed, as an act of gratitude to Heaven, I would make you my special care. Are you willing that this should be so?'

'You overwhelm me with gratitude, madame,' she replied, with tears in her eyes.

'Nay, I would not do that, dear child. You agree to become my charge—that is well. Do not think that I wish to pry into your life, or ask any questions; there is but one I must ask, and my heart answers it before my lips speak it. One cannot help seeing that you have had a misfortune of some kind or

other. Tell me quite frankly, has it been your own fault?' To herself, this kindly lady admitted that it would be just as easy to accuse an angel from Heaven.

Agatha looked at her with a pale, fearless face.

'I hardly know how to answer your question, madame,' she said. 'How far I am to blame in the eyes of God I know not. I never had the least intention of wrong in my life; but I am afraid that I am weak, credulous and ignorant enough to stand worthy of blame before Heaven.'

'Poor child!' said madame, thinking how wicked any one must have been to take advantage of such innocence as hers.

'Very hard and bitter things have been said to me,' she continued; 'I cannot tell you if I deserve them. I can only say that of myself I would at any time prefer death to sin; but I have been sinned against. Madame, my dear young mother named me Agatha after the fair young saint on the old church window—a saint with a halo round her head and a palm branch in her hand, and her story is this, that she preferred to die rather than offend God. I would do just the same.'

The fair, pure face, the tender eyes, the sweet, sensitive lips, the clear, vibrating voice, all impressed madame.

'I believe you,' she said; 'and I trust you. That question is at an end. Whatever your misfortune may have been, it was not, I am sure, your fault. Now you must decide your life in your own way; I leave the decision with you. You are a lady?'

'I am a doctor's daughter,' said Agatha, simply, and madame smiled.

'By appearance, education, and manner, you are evidently a lady, well qualified to take your place in any society. Now I offer you your choice. I adopt you, in gratitude to Heaven. You will forgive my frank speaking if I tell you that you are so beautiful and winning, that if I introduce you into society you would marry well.'

The sweet face grew just a little paler.

'Oh, no, madame; I shall never marry,' she replied; 'and your rank is so far above mine—that—I would rather not. If you are good enough to take any interest in me, madame, let me be taught to work. I do not think now that I could live unless my mind were always employed. If I have leisure to think I shall most surely die.'

'It shall be as you wish,' said the countess. 'What would you like to be? What would you choose?—some profession?'

'I should like to make my life useful to others,' she said; 'and I love children. I think, madame, and if you are willing, I should like to be a governess.'

'I think it is a very sensible decision,' replied madame.

She was silent for some minutes, during which Agatha watched her anxiously. Then she spoke.

'What are your qualifications, my dear?' she asked. 'What could you teach?'

'Music,' replied Agatha, her face brightening—'I understand it well; and French, and Italian; and I think I am a good English scholar.'

'A very fair list of qualifications,' said madame, well pleased. 'Of course there will be a difficulty about situations at first—you had better take one with me. Come and stay with me as my companion, for six months. You can read to me, write my letters, play to me—for I love music. You need not be seen, you can have two rooms; and when I have visitors—which I do three times each week—you can always retire. Then, when the time is over, unless you wish to remain, I can give you such recommendations as will insure you a good situation anywhere.'

'How must I thank you, madame!' she cried; 'my heart is full of gratitude. How good you are to me! What should I have done but for you?'

'Thank Heaven, my dear child, which has made me the means of carrying its bounty to you. Thank Heaven!'

'When I lay in the little room,' said Agatha, 'how often have I wondered what would become of me when I grew well. I did not know. And now you, madame, have taken every shadow of care from my heart. I thank you.'

'We must go into details now,' said madame. 'Of course, you are quite unprovided with dress, and indeed with everything else?'

'I am, indeed,' said Agatha.

Madame opened her desk, and took from it a bank note.

'That will provide you with two or three neat dresses, and all that you want besides,' she said, 'and you may repay me, when you get rich.'

A few more days, and Agatha was installed in the luxurious mansion of the Countess de Tiernay. Every attention was paid to her. She had two very nice rooms, and she had time for herself; madame was by no means an exacting employer. In time she became greatly attached to the beautiful English girl, whose sweet face was always so sad; she loved her very much, and the more time she spent with her the more she admired her, the purity of her character, the frank, noble simplicity that could hardly even comprehend deceit or meanness in others, the fervent spiritual mind; the way that seemed so natural to her of thinking more of Heaven than of earth, all charmed the countess.

'You like to visit the poor,' she said to her one day, 'you shall have *carte blanche*; there are over a hundred families at least that I should like to assist. You shall be almoner.'

And something of the old light came back to her when she was once more of use to the poor. The intolerable sense of degradation under which she had suffered and smarted, seemed lessened. Once more the sweet face did its work among the poor wounded hearts, brought sunshine where darkness had long reigned.

The first day of her residence in that superb mansion the countess asked her what was her name.

'There is nothing in a name,' said madame laughing, 'still I must have one for you—you ought to be called "Lily," you are just like one. Yesterday, when you threw my blue shawl over your arm, you looked to me so exactly like one of Raphael's Madonnas, I was quite startled.'

'My name is Brooke,' said Agatha—while the countess had been talking she had been thinking, and the result of her decision was that she would take no false name, that she would use no more disguises. She had done nothing that compelled her to hide herself. 'My name is Brooke,' she repeated; then she bowed her head, while a great, fitful flush rose to her face. 'I will not hide from you, madame,' she said, 'that, for a short time in my life, I bore another name which I equally believed to be my own; but I had been deceived. I had no right to it.'

And madame, respected the frank young soul that struggled against all deceit and untruth.

All went on gayly, pleasantly, and happily until the young count returned. He had been in the south of France some weeks for his health, and returned well and strong. He had been in the house some few days before he even saw Agatha. When they met it was at the foot of the grand staircase, and Henri, Count de Tiernay, gazed in wonder at the fair English girl. He made her a profound bow. He was a fine, gallant young fellow, brave as a lion, but vain, and he considered himself irresistible. A look from his fine eyes was, he considered, an arrow in the heart of any woman. France was the finest country in the world; Frenchmen the grandest race; French women adorable; French characteristics the finest known. Of himself the young count had the best opinion. He did not think the woman was born who could resist him. He was perfectly good—as moral as a French count could be—the very soul of good nature, but vain as a boarding-school beauty. He darted one glance at the pale, beautiful face, and then he treated Agatha to his best bow.

‘That must impress her,’ he thought. ‘It is impossible for it to be otherwise;’ while Agatha, whose horror of men had reached a frenzy, hastened away without the least acknowledgment of the count’s courtly bow. He stood looking after her, and he smiled to himself as though his thoughts were very pleasant ones.

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## CHAPTER XL.

### A PROPOSAL REJECTED.

**I**N vain did Count Henri linger in the halls, on the staircases, and pay the most devoted attention to his lady mother—he saw no more of the enchanting vision. Tired of waiting in vain, he determined to ask the countess about her.

‘Mamma, he said, one evening, as he sipped his coffee, ‘the other day, on the staircase here, I saw an angel!’



'She is an angel, my dear, if you mean Miss Brooke,' she replied.

'Who is Miss Brooke?' he inquired.

'A *protege* of mine—a young lady under my especial care and protection.'

'A very happy young lady to be so well placed,' said the count, with another of his finest bows to his mother.

The countess gave him the full history of her, and he was deeply interested. Quick, like all his countrymen, to feel and to sympathize, the tears rose to his eyes as he heard the pathetic story of the girl's illness.

'How sad!' he cried. 'You are good, mother. I must do something for her as well.'

'No, my son, that would not do. She is my *protege*, and I require no help. She is a lady; indeed I may say that in my whole life I have met with no more perfect lady than this young girl.'

The count bowed again. What a most charming circumstance that this young girl should have taken refuge with his mother!

Another week passed, and he had seen nothing of her. Agatha, going to her sitting-room one morning; found there a superb bouquet of flowers, all white, and of the most costly description. In one moment her instinct told her that the count had sent them. She took them up in her hands at once, and went with them to madame's room.

'These must be intended for you, Madame la Countess,' she said, 'and they have been brought to my room by mistake.'

Madame took them without any comment—she never thought of her son. He did not feel so victorious as usual when he saw his costly bouquet distributed among the vases in his mother's boudoir.

'A silent warfare,' thought the count.

The next day on her table appeared an equally magnificent bouquet, all of crimson flowers. They shared the same fate.

'I will not be discouraged,' said the count to himself; and the day following she found a fragrant mass of Parma violets imbedded in damp moss. The fragrance filled her room, and sent her mind back to that beautiful valley in Whitecroft, where the spring violets grew. She placed them in the dining-room, so that he should see they were not accepted.

Seeing that she persisted in ignoring him, the count became more and more determined on making a conquest. Fortune favored him; going to his mother's boudoir one morning, he found Miss Brooke there mending some of the rare old lace.

He was, perhaps, a little disappointed that, after all his gallant attentions, the beautiful face neither flushed nor paled for him. Agatha made him one bow—the very essence of discretion—and never even gave another glance in his direction.

After that, finding that her *protege* had a real aversion to the society of all gentlemen, madame never sought to keep her apart from her son. The young count joined the ladies at their work, and read aloud to them. But never, during the numerous times they met, did Agatha ever give look or word to the count. Madame was charmed with her. Such discretion, such prudence, such wisdom she had never seen in one so young and beautiful.

A few more weeks passed on, and all was peace. Agatha strove her best; she beat back with an iron hand the great waves of pain and despair that seemed to overwhelm her. She prayed through the long watches of the night; she visited and comforted the poor; she busied herself in doing everything that was most kind and attentive for madame; but the pain of her terrible wound never stopped—she might hide it and cover it, but it was always there.

The time came when the count declared himself madly in love with her. The first symptom of it was a morocco case found on the table of her sitting-room. She opened it, and found therein a brooch and a pair of diamond ear-rings. They glistened and shone like fire. She closed the case hastily—the very sight of them pierced her heart as with a sharp sword. She went to him at once; she had heard him open the dining-room door. She followed him into the room, and returned the packet to him.

'You have made a mistake, Monsieur le Count,' she said. 'I could not take this present from you. And would you be so kind in the future to refrain from sending me flowers? It does not please me.'

'I am grieved at having offended you,' he said.

'I am not offended,' she replied, simply. 'You meant it kindly, but these things are not pleasing to me.'

'Great Heaven! what are these English?' thought the young man to himself. 'The most charming of their maidens remains undazzled by flowers and diamonds.'

'It shall be just as mademoiselle wishes,' he replied. 'My object was merely to give pleasure.'

'I assure you,' she replied, with a candor that was almost shocking, 'that I find no pleasure in it.'

With a look of deep mortification, the count bowed again.

'I am indeed unfortunate,' he said. 'I am most unhappy.'

A smile, long absent from Agatha's face, came back—a smile that seemed to begin in her eyes and ripple over her lips—a smile that made her so beautiful, the young man said to himself, suddenly:

'I will marry her! She will be the fairest wife in France. But this requires thought.'

The thought, once having taken root in his mind, he fell a victim to it. Her face haunted him; he thought of it by day and by night. It was the first serious attack of love-fever he had had; he had worshipped at a hundred shrines, but never for long, and now he wanted to marry.

He thought about it for some time; his mother might say something of her past, which he understood to be mysterious; what of that to him? She had no money, true; but she was a fortune in her adorable self.

He could not and would not see any reason in the world why he should not marry this girl on whom he had fixed his heart.

Having determined himself to marry her, it did not occur to him that perhaps she might not be willing. His chief puzzle was how he should make the offer—whether it should be through his mother, whether he should write, or whether he should seek an interview with her himself. That he might be refused or rejected never occurred to him.

'The English miss,' so beautiful, so good, with the face and voice of an angel. It would be better—surely a hundred times better—to write to her; it was more respectful, more like homage. He composed a letter that for eloquence, for description of his love-sickness, was a masterpiece worthy of Dumas.

He was delighted with it; he read and re-read it, lamenting that all the young men of Paris were not there to profit by it. He gave it to her himself.

'Miss Brooke,' he said, 'the answer to that makes me the happiest man on earth, or plunges me into despair.'

Agatha was beginning to feel much annoyed at his proceedings. She liked him just because he was the son of madame; she was pleased with his general character, much amused at his vanity. She was almost shocked when she read that most complimentary letter.

That any one should want to marry her—should think of marrying her—was to her most horrible. She could not think why so young and happy a man as the count should want to marry her. There was a kind of desecration in her mind—she, who had believed herself to be Vane's wife, to receive an offer of marriage; she was humiliated at the very idea of it.

Perhaps Henri Count de Tiernay was never so surprised in his life as when he received the answer to his note. She thanked him courteously and gracefully, but was firm in declining it. She prayed that he would never allude to it again.

The count was furious, baffled. Love and despair raged in his breast. He went to his mother and told her how much he loved the young English girl.

'She will never marry, my son,' said the countess. 'I know but little of her past, yet I am sure there is something in it which will keep her from marrying.'

The count was inconsolable.

'It is just my luck,' he said, 'to fall in love with one I can never marry!'

'It seems to me that every wish in your life has so far been gratified. You must learn to bear disappointment.'

She was sorry for him, but at the same time thankful Miss Brooke had refused him. She had taken a *protege* for the love of Heaven, but she did not at the same time expect in her a daughter-in-law.

Agatha looked pitifully at her.

'Dear madame,' she said, 'I must go; I must leave you; I could not remain here. Monsieur le count looks miserable, and when I have been away a few days he will have forgotten me.'

'I am afraid not,' replied madame, slowly. 'For many things I should have liked my son to have had a wife like you.'

You would have such a good influence over him. Must you leave me, do you think ?'

'I am afraid there is no other course open to me,' said Agatha.

And madame sighed deeply. She was grieved to lose her beautiful and charming companion ; yet she said that the time was come when she must part with her.

After some long discussion and conversation, it was arranged that Agatha should go to one of the chief registry offices in Paris and try to find a situation.

'You will have no difficulty,' said madame ; and, indeed, her only embarrassment was one of choice ; that from the dozen placed before her she should have chosen the one she did was a fatality. Certainly, the mistress of the registry office spoke of it as being one of the best situations on her books.

An English lady and gentleman residing in Paris—and a thoroughly accomplished, well educated lady was wanted as a companion to the wife.

'Are there no children to teach ?' asked Agatha.

'No, there are no children,' was the reply ; and it certainly seemed to her a wonder why any wife needed a companion when she had a husband.

The agent gave her a card with the address—' Mr. and Mrs. Norman, Rue Rivoli, Paris.'

She went at once. The house was a mansion, almost as magnificent in its way as madame's. There was a lavishness of wealth and luxury about it that amazed Agatha. The servants seemed to be all English. A footman asked her into the library, and told her that Mrs. Norman would be with her soon. The luxury of this room surprised her—there was every possible resource. What could the mistress of such a house want with a companion ?

## CHAPTER XLI.

## A HOUSE WITH A MYSTERY.

AGATHA rose from her chair as a tall, well-dressed lady entered the room. She, who in her simple way was a keen observer of character, was struck dumb at once by the repressed power and passion of the woman's face. A tall and very beautiful figure. Agatha was impressed also by the figure; it was simply perfection; and the dress she wore of pale gray-velvet, fitted her like a glove. Every line and curve of that figure was shown by the wonderful Parisian costume. She had the most exquisite white hands, but her face was plain and ordinary, her eyes small and too close together, the mouth not well formed, and showing by no means beautiful teeth—'a plain woman' any one must have called her; but there was something in her face which attracted attention.

Under some circumstances, the face might have been much more comely, but now it was hard and suspicious. Agatha was not altogether impressed favorably with her.

'I am Mrs. Norman,' she said; and the voice was thoroughly refined, musical and clear.

'I am Miss Brooke. I have called from the registry office.'

'Pray be seated, Miss Brooke; and as you have travelled some little distance, let me offer you some refreshment.'

A good and kindly beginning, but Agatha declined anything.

Mrs. Norman looked anxiously at her.

'Do you know,' she said, and again Agatha was struck with the bitterness in her voice, 'do you know that you are a very beautiful woman?'

'I am afraid that I care very little about it; that fact gives me no pleasure.'

'And I would give the whole wide world and everything in it for a beautiful face, and you do not prize it! Shall you like being a companion?'

'Yes; very much,' she answered.

'Do you realize the fact,' continued Mrs. Norman, 'that if, with a face like yours, you appeared in society here in Paris, where they go mad about beautiful women, you would marry at once and marry well?'

Agatha turned from her with a sick shudder, sick at heart.

'Ah!' cried Mrs. Norman, with fierce delight; that does not tempt you. You do not care about society—its base lies and deceits, its fashion of smiling in your face while it stabs you to the heart. You do not care for it?'

'Not in the least. I would never mix in it if I could possibly help it.'

Mrs. Norman looked quite pleased. Then another idea seemed to flit over her face.

'Did you come direct from the office, Miss Brooke?'

'Yes, direct,' she replied, wondering what the strange lady meant.

'You are quite sure?'

'Yes, quite sure,' replied Agatha.

'Have you heard my name?—do you know anything of me?' asked Mrs. Norman.

'No, I have not heard it. I have not heard you mentioned,' she replied.

She saw a sudden yellow fire leap into the dark eyes, and Mrs. Norman looked at her with a sweet, subtle smile.

'One is compelled to ask so many questions,' she said, 'and some of them are so disagreeable. I must ask this: Has—has my husband had anything to do with this—your application to me?'

But Agatha was too innocent to understand even the meaning of the question. The insult, for it was one, flowed past her, leaving her unharmed.

'No,' she replied wonderingly. 'It was the Countess de Tiernay who sent me to the registry office.'

Mrs. Norman saw that no glimpse of her meaning had been understood by the pure-minded girl. She was pleased.

'You have been living as companion with her for some time, I suppose?'

'Yes,' replied Agatha. 'I had thought of returning to England, but if I should be so fortunate as to please you, I should not mind remaining in Paris.'

'We shall remain for the present, I am sure,' said Mrs. Norman, with a stiff, disagreeable smile that Agatha understood afterward. 'Now about terms, Miss Brooke. Pardon me if I say that money is no object with me. I want a bright, kind, clever companion.'

'I am sure I can be kind; I could promise to be most attentive and devoted to you; all my life I have been accustomed to take care of others; but I cannot, I am afraid, always be bright.'

'You will be bright enough for me,' said Mrs. Norman.

'As for being clever,' continued Agatha, 'I can say nothing.'

'There is nothing to be said; I know all about it,' said Mrs. Norman. 'Let me explain your duties. You will have two rooms for yourself, and your duties will never begin until noon. The first thing, you will have to take luncheon with us—with Mr. Norman and myself; then in the afternoon we will drive or walk; we dine at seven, after which we go to theatre, or ball, or opera; we never spend an evening at home. My husband likes society, and I do not care to be alone in this great house. I want you to take luncheon with us, to dine with us, to go everywhere with me, from the time you join me in the morning until night not to leave me. Should you like that life?'

'As well as any other,' said Agatha.

'Then we may consider the affair settled,' replied Mrs. Norman. 'The question of stipend you will find that I have made a note of here. If it pleases you, let me know. And I must add this, Miss Brooke, that if you go out with me I must find you in dresses. When could you come to me?'

'Any time you wish. I am at liberty to-day.'

'Then come to-morrow,' she replied.

'I will do so,' said Agatha.

Just as they were parting, Mrs. Norman took up a photograph that stood in a beautiful frame on the table. She held it out to Agatha.

'What do you think of this?' she said.

Agatha looked at the face. It was singularly handsome, bright, full of impulse, but not trustworthy—by no means trustworthy.

'What do you think of that face?' asked Mrs. Norman.



'Agatha looked at her suddenly. It seemed a strange proceeding, and not altogether wise to pronounce any decided opinion on a stranger. Why should Mrs. Norman want her opinion on any face ?

'Should you think that a face to be trusted ?' asked Mrs. Norman.

Agatha looked helpless, first at her and then at the photograph. Prudence and common sense told her she had better not answer. She said :

'I do not believe that anyone judges of character from photographs. I could judge better if I saw the living face. It is very handsome, but I can see nothing more than beauty.'

Mrs. Norman hardly looked pleased : evidently she wanted Agatha to say the face was not a true one.

The whole interview left a strange impression on her mind.

Mrs. Norman's face was different from any she had seen, the repressed passion, the power, the strong character, all struck her. When she told the story of that interview to Madame de Tiernay, the French lady said at once :

'You must take care, Miss Brooke ; I feel sure there is a mystery in that household. Do not go—there are plenty of other situations open to you.'

'I shall have something to bear everywhere,' said Agatha ; 'and I feel interested in this lady. She did not look to me like a happy woman. Perhaps I may be of some use to her—I may add to her comfort.'

'There is one thing,' said madame, 'if you do not like the household, you can leave at once ; you will always have a home here.'

If the Countess de Tiernay had known all that was about to happen, then she would rather have kept Agatha with her at any cost to her son.

Agatha went, as had been arranged, on the day following. Mrs. Norman received her kindly. She was shown to her room, and the rest of the day was given to her to arrange the wardrobe and drawers, and make herself quite comfortable.

'My maid is a Frenchwoman,' said Mrs. Norman, 'and she will do anything you wish. Her name is Aline.'

And Agatha found Aline a nice, kind-hearted girl.

There was some mystery in the house, there could be no doubt of that. When Aline spoke of her mistress, her voice changed and grew full of sympathy.

Agatha spent the greater part of the day in her rooms; then, just before six a message came to her from Mrs. Norman asking if she would like to go down to dinner.

'I may as well,' she thought.

She chose a pretty dinner-dress of plain black net, but the white, beautiful neck and arms shone through it with the gleam of pearls, the fair face and golden head rose like a flower from the cloud of net. She looked far too beautiful for her post, and the worst thing about it was this, that the more she tried to disguise her loveliness the more distinctly it was seen.

She went down to the drawing-room where Mrs. Norman waited for her; she smiled when she saw the exquisite face and figure—a curious, thoughtful, complex smile, that would not make any one feel much the happier for seeing it. She herself was superbly attired in a dress of pale velvet, trimmed with oak-leaves, the faultless figure, the superb bust and shoulders, the white, rounded arms and lovely hands contrasted oddly with the plain face.

Mrs. Norman went up to her.

'How happy you must be to have that beautiful face. I wish to Heaven I could buy it from you.'

'Why should you want it? You have beauty enough of your own.'

'Beauty!' she repeated, with a little reckless laugh. 'If I had your face I would have my heart's desire—I would have my revenge. You must not think that I am mad, but you do not know what a beautiful face would do for me.'

A sound of coming footsteps—Mrs. Norman's face flushed, then turned deadly pale; she trembled with agitation.

The door opened, and a gentleman entered—the original of the photograph, Agatha saw at once. He spoke a few careless words to his wife, and bowed low when he was introduced to Miss Brooke.

His wife was watching him; she noticed the start of surprise; the look of admiration. It was impossible to tell whether she was pleased or angry. As a relief to all embar-

rassment, the dinner-bell rang, and the three went to the dining-room together.

Agatha looked curiously at the master of the house. He was very handsome, but the face did not please her. It was not true; there was a shiftiness in the fine eyes, something of cunning in the smile—she did not like them.

He was very attentive to her, and, in a minor degree, to his wife. He drank plenty of champagne, and pressed it eagerly upon them.

'What are you going to do this evening?' asked Mrs. Norman.

As she toyed with some rich purple grapes lying in her plate those white fingers trembled with agitation.'

'This evening,' he said, 'I have three or four imperative engagements.'

'None of them include *me*, I suppose?' said Mrs. Norman

'I think not. I shall be at liberty to-morrow evening.'

'Will you? Then I should like to witness the 'Sphinx.' It is being played now at the —, and they tell me that the new actress, Mademoiselle Freda is perfection.'

She looked direct at her husband as she spoke. He laughed, and a flush passed over his handsome face.

'Perfection is very difficult to find,' he replied.

And then Agatha knew there was something wrong between husband and wife.

## CHAPTER XLII.

### THE HUSBAND'S JOKE.

**I**T was not altogether unpleasant this first day in her new and strange home. Agatha was an early riser, and her duties did not begin until noon; she was free to do as she liked. She could wander over the beautiful picture-galleries of Paris, over the dim, beautiful churches; she could

read, she could sit in the lovely gardens of the Tuileries, she could stand on one of the bridges and watch the flow of the Seine. Those morning hours were invaluable to her.

Then came the part of the day she really did not like, sitting down to breakfast with Mr. and Mrs. Norman; they were either gloomily silent, icily polite, or disagreeable to each other; there was never any attempt at pleasant conversation. During luncheon Mrs. Norman inquired about his engagements, during dinner she sneered at them. When she asked her husband to take her out he generally contrived to avoid it. Once he said, laughingly:

'It has such a stupid, old-fashioned Darby and Joan kind of a look, taking one's wife out in that manner. We shall be called "Darby and Joan," Phillis, if you are not careful.'

'I do not agree with you,' said Mrs. Norman; 'the most fitting and proper thing in the whole world is for a husband to take his wife out.'

'Look at the fashionable ladies of Paris; when do you ever see them at the theatre or opera with their husbands.'

'Thank Heaven I am not a Frenchwoman!' said Mrs. Norman.

'I am not sure that you have much to be thankful for,' said Mr. Norman. 'My idea is that people should go out to enjoy themselves—not in fetters and chains.'

'I always enjoy myself best with you,' said Mrs. Norman. He laughed carelessly.

'The circumstances are quite different.'

'You mean,' she retorted, 'that I, being a plain woman, attract no attention, and could not expect to receive any, except from my own husband!'

'If you choose to imagine that I mean all kinds of disagreeable things,' he said, 'I cannot help it. It is quite as easy to interpret people kindly as unkindly.'

'My husband,' said Mrs. Norman, turning to Agatha, 'is a fervent worshipper of beauty. A woman may be all that is most accomplished, clever and intellectual, but unless she has a beautiful face, he would not admire her.'

'Do you think that a very formidable trait in my character, Miss Brooke?' he asked.

Agatha answered:

'I think it is a very common one, and that you share it with most other gentlemen.'

'That is very cruel of you,' he said.

'It is perfectly true,' she replied. 'I think most men are led away by a pretty face or a well-turned figure.'

'I like them combined,' said Mr. Norman, with an air for which she could have boxed his ears.

'Mr. Norman differs from other people in this respect,' said his wife, 'that he very often sees beauty where others see none.'

No smile came to her face. It was like a long civil war, and Agatha accustomed to the devotion and love of Sir Vane, could not understand it. She sat, looking from one to another in wonder. Was this the peace, love, and happiness of married life? There were times when Mr. Norman seemed to hate the very sound of his wife's voice, and when she detested him. Agatha could not tell at the end of a month whether this plain woman, with the beautiful figure, loved her husband or detested him.

That there was something unusual between them she felt assured; but she was far too delicate and refined to make any effort to find it out. One thing struck her with wonder every hour of the day, and it was the lady's anxiety to make herself better looking. She spent a small fortune in the purchase of cosmetics, powders, and washes for the complexion, but she could not improve a skin that nature had never intended to be smooth and clear.

'Do tell me,' she would say, looking wistfully at Agatha— 'do tell me how you manage that lovely complexion? It looks like milk and roses.'

'I do not manage it at all,' Agatha replied, with a wondering laugh.

'You must use something,' said Mrs. Norman.

'I use plenty of soft, beautiful rain water,' said Agatha, and then for some time Mrs. Norman had a mania for the use of rain water.

Gradually, but slowly the truth broke in upon Agatha.

It was because Mrs. Norman's husband so greatly admired beautiful women that she wanted to be beautiful. When Agatha found out that, her heart went out in wistful pity to

the woman whose plain face was her one great trouble. The motive seemed almost to justify the weakness of vanity; but before Agatha had been many weeks there she felt quite sure that even if madam had the beauty of Venus, her husband would never have loved her. One little incident told her that. Mr. Norman was playing one day with a beautiful little spaniel, when by some accident the dog detached the gold chain he wore, and a pretty golden locket which had been fastened to it, which rolled away to the ground.

It fell near Agatha. As a mere act of common politeness she picked it up. The fall had opened it, and though she had not the faintest wish to see what it contained, she could not help it. Her eyes fell on the loveliest girl's face she had ever beheld—a face with splendid liquid blue eyes and golden hair. She thought nothing of it—a man may wear the portrait of his sister, mother, cousin, aunt or friend. It certainly looks better when he wears the portrait of his wife; but then every one does not study outward appearances. As she returned the locket to him he saw that she must have seen the face inside. Their eyes met and his face flushed a little. She forgot the whole event until the next day, when Mr. Norman made a pretext for speaking to her.

'Miss Brooke,' he said, 'I want to thank you for your kindness to me yesterday over the locket.'

She looked up in quick surprise.

'I remember no kindness, Mr. Norman,' she said.

'I do. You picked up my locket and gave it to me.'

'That was courtesy, not kindness,' she said, gravely.

'Call it by what name you will, it is all the same,' he answered. 'I am grateful to you. You saw the face it had?'

'I saw a face,' she admitted, reluctantly.

'Did you recognize it?' he asked, quickly.

'I—certainly not. I hardly saw it.'

'Well,' he said, laughingly, 'you are about the only lady in Paris who would not have known it at once.'

'I have not the faintest interest in it,' she said coldly.

'Add one favor,' he continued. 'Say nothing to Mrs. Norman about it. One may just as well avoid all scenes.'

'I am indignant that you should think such a request needless,' she replied. 'I am incapable of doing such a thing.'

'It is a foolish thing of me to wear it,' he said, 'but I was compelled to yield.'

'I beg,' said Agatha, with the gentle dignity which suited her so well—'I beg that you will not insult me by saying any more about it, or I shall feel sorry that I rendered you the service, slight as it was. I have no wish for any confidence on the point.'

'I repeat that you are the only lady in Paris who would not have known the face.'

'I have no reply to make,' she said.

'Of course,' he cried, impatiently, 'you take madame's side. You women hang together so that a man has no chance.'

'If you will be pleased to remember that I do not even understand you,' said Agatha; but she was to understand soon.

A few days after this Mrs. Norman wanted some shopping done, and did not feel inclined to go out—her head ached, and she was depressed in spirits. Agatha offered to go and do it for her. While she was in the Palais Royal she had some occasion to go into a jeweller's shop; a brooch that she valued much was broken. To her surprise she saw Mr. Norman there, and before him on the counter lay some superb diamonds. One she noted especially for its rare beauty—a diamond necklace, and instead of locket or pendant there was attached to it a diamond cross.

'This is the finest set we have,' said the jeweller. 'They were ordered by a Russian prince for his wife, but she died, and he has left them with us.'

'The finest, but the most expensive,' said Mr. Norman.

'That goes without saying,' he replied.

'What is the price?' asked Mr. Norman. 'Now say the least you can. Do not ask the most for the time-honored reason that I am an Englishman.'

The jeweller whispered to him. There was some slight controversy, and then he cried out:

'I will take them; I will write out a check now.'

He did not see Agatha, who transacted her business, happy to think that he was making so magnificent a present to the wife who, for his sake, had such a passionate desire to be beautiful. It comforted her simple heart. After all, she thought, she had judged him harshly. A man who spends so many

thousand pounds on his wife must have some good in him. She heard him say something to the jeweller about sending them that very afternoon—there must be no delay; and she positively hurried home that she might be there to congratulate Mrs. Norman.

The husband was more agreeable than ever during breakfast. He told some sparkling stories. He dipped lightly into the floating scandals, but the wife's face was gloomy and lowering—evidently the diamonds had not arrived.

'They will come this afternoon,' Agatha thought, 'and then this dear lady will smile.'

But the afternoon wore on, and no diamonds came, neither could she by any charm drive away the despondency from madame's face.

'When she knows what a beautiful present is coming to her, she will cheer up,' thought simple Agatha; 'and though she has fine jewels, she has nothing like those diamonds, and they will suit her well.'

But the diamonds did not come, and she began to think that the jeweller must have made a mistake.' She grew quite nervous and anxious about them; she had not distinctly heard Mr. Norman repeat that they were to be sent that afternoon.

It would be better, she thought, in her simplicity, to speak to him. What a horrible thing it would be if they were lost. The sweet face grew quite pale with anxiety at the idea. Better to speak to him most certainly. So when Mr. Norman came home, and was going to his dressing room, she sent to ask if she could see him for a few minutes. All Paris laughed next day at the story. He told it in the most amusing fashion everywhere—at the clubs, on the boulevards—and very much indeed the gay city enjoyed the joke. She spoke with admirable simplicity, and seemed so anxious that the jewels should not be lost. He laughed; then he said, solemnly:

'Have you mentioned the matter to Mrs. Norman?'

'Certainly not,' she replied.

'Then do not do so. You have fallen asleep and dreamed it all. I have never purchased diamonds, or anything else for my wife; and what is more, I never thought of doing so.'

Agatha was left to make what reflections she liked.



## CHAPTER XLIII.

## A WOMAN'S TERRIBLE VENGEANCE.

**E**VIDENTLY something worse than usual had happened, for Mrs. Norman looked really unhappy. She had never been bright or cheerful, but now she was something worse than that. Her husband never took any notice of her failing health or spirits. Since the affair of the diamonds, Agatha had quite disliked Mr. Norman; she would have left but that she had grown attached to the unhappy woman, who never ceased to bewail her want of beauty. She said one day to Agatha:

'If I had been offered my choice of all the gifts that Heaven gives to men and women I would have chosen beauty.'

'You would have been like Paris,' replied Agatha, 'and I have always thought that an ignoble choice. Juno offered him power; Minerva offered him wisdom; Venus offered him beauty, and he chose it. I would have taken either of the other two in his place.'

'Beauty wins the hearts of men,' sighed the woman who longed for it.

'It may win, but it does not keep them. A man can love beauty in a picture or a statue? He wants more than that when he loves. Shall I tell you what I think is the *one* quality in a woman that would win a man's heart most quickly and keep it best.'

'I should like to hear,' said Mrs. Norman.

'Constant cheerfulness,' said Agatha. 'To my thinking, that is a quality far before beauty in any woman.'

'I wish other people thought the same thing. I would cultivate a cheerful face. But, Miss Brooke, nothing could make my face even passable: I know all its defects. My eyes are small, and so close together! breadth between the eyes and the eyebrows is a great beauty, and my husband loves a beautiful face.'

There was such pathetic misery in her voice that Agatha's heart was greatly touched.

'I wish you could believe me,' she said, that you must certainly overrate beauty. Some of the most charming women who ever lived have not had one good feature in their faces—not one. Genius, good-temper, power, eloquence, shown in the face, are better than beauty. You will forgive me if I say that you have little reason to complain. Nature has given you a perfect figure; you have the most beautiful neck, arms, and hands I have ever seen. To watch you move is a pleasure.'

'You are kind to say so; but once—once!' she repeated, with a sudden passion, 'I heard my husband say that my face was as malicious as it was ugly. He does not know that I heard him, but I did. Another time I heard him say that he could *not* kiss a plain woman.' She added sadly, 'he never kisses me.'

'I am sure if you would try to be bright and cheerful, to smile and talk pleasantly, it would be different,' said Agatha.

'You speak who have never known neglect or indifference; you who have beauty speak to one without it.'

'A beautiful soul makes a beautiful face—intelligence on the brow; a clear, frank, pure nature shining in the eyes; grace, courtesy, and love on the lips, are better than pink and white loveliness.'

Mrs. Norman shook her head gravely.

'I have seen what I have seen,' she said, 'and my experience has not been too pleasant.'

'I know I shall never convince you, but it is a fact that some of the most famous women have been the plainest—women who have ruled the world. Of what avail was her great beauty to Marie Stuart?—it did not keep her head from the block. Of what avail was her queenly loveliness to Marie Antoinette? How many women whose souls are lost would now be saints in Heaven but for the curse of beauty?'

'Still it is power—Marie Stuart's face has come down to us in song and story.'

'It has—but it did not save her from death. Beauty may charm for a while, but, believe me, men soon tire of it, while of mental charms they never tire.'

'Has your beauty given you no pleasure?' asked the restless woman.

'None,' said Agatha Brooke.

A few days afterward two or three friends came to dine at the house. Mrs. Norman was very kind and considerate.

'If you would rather not dine with us, Miss Brooke,' she said, 'it will be quite right. I think, though, that you would enjoy it.'

'Will your visitors be French people?' asked Agatha.

'No; they are Americans,' replied Mrs. Norman; 'very nice, clever people. I think you would like them. I need not say that I shall be only too well pleased if you will come; then the burden of entertaining will not fall upon me.'

It was a pleasant dinner party. Mr. Norman was in one of his most amiable moods; his wife evidently did her best to be cheerful and bright. It was by far the most pleasant evening she had spent there yet. The Americans were cultivated musicians; Colonel Napier Hudson had a fine tenor voice, and his fair young wife a sweet and plaintive contralto.

It was the conversation during dinner that struck Agatha the most; it turned upon the difference of crime in England and France. Colonel Hudson thought the French people more capricious and fantastic in their crimes than the English.

'A stupid, brutal murder is essentially English,' he said; 'death by the fumes of charcoal or the depths of the river, essentially French. There is far more fantastic horror in a French murder than in an English one. An Englishman, wishing to murder his wife, kicks her to death; a Frenchman shuts her up with a pan of charcoal.'

And the two gentlemen argued for some time as to which method displayed the greatest sign of civilization.

'We have not chosen a very cheerful subject,' laughed Mrs. Colonel Hudson. 'Speaking of murders, all Paris is ringing with the most terrible story that has ever been told.'

'What is it?' asked Mrs. Norman. 'Some of the most awful tragedies have taken place in Paris, and if this be the worst, it must be very bad.'

'It is very bad,' said Mrs. Colonel Hudson; 'so bad that it could not be worse. In our country many a man and woman have been lynched for less. This is the most horrible thing I have ever heard.'

'I hardly like to say "tell it to us,"' said Mrs. Norman; 'but you have excited my curiosity.'

'And mine,' added her husband.

'It seems too terrible even to mention in this happy home atmosphere,' said Mrs. Colonel Hudson.

So far as outward appearances went, nothing could be more luxurious and more cheerful than this brilliant room; the table itself was a picture—the most costly glass and antique silver, the finest damask, the loveliest flowers, and the richest fruits—a picture to bear in one's mind.

Mrs. Norman wore a picturesque dress of black and gold, with wonderful rubies shining on her white neck. Mrs. Colonel Hudson wore a superb dinner dress of blue velvet and pearls; Agatha a simple but exquisite black lace, with a pomegranate blossom in her hair, the gentlemen of the party were distinguished looking. Altogether it seemed neither the time, the place, nor the society for such a story as she had to tell.

'I do not care for horrors,' said the American lady, 'but this story, ringing all over Paris, combines so many elements, and shows how black a fiend a woman may become. Of course it contains love and jealousy?'

Agatha saw, or fancied she saw, a keen gleam of interest in Mrs. Norman's face.

'Love and jealousy are the foundations of all tragedies,' she said, and her husband interrupted quickly.

'They are the cause of a great deal of nonsense,' but no one took up the challenge.

'I have forgotten all the names,' said the American lady. 'There is the lover and the lady. He seems to have been a steady, kind-hearted man, and he was engaged to marry this woman. For some reason or other, this lady became jealous, and the object of her jealousy was a beautiful young actress, at one of the theatres here, in Paris.'

Agatha was not mistaken this time. Over the plain face of Mrs. Norman came a strange expression, a change of color, a nervous contraction of the lips. No one else remarked it, and the American lady went on with her story.

'There was no real cause for this jealousy. The man was true and faithful to her, but she brooded over it until she must have gone mad. One evening they went together to the theatre in question. Whether the woman saw anything which provoked her anger or not, no one knows. Coming through one of the

long, dark passages that led to the street, there was a sudden and most horrible cry; the man threw up his arms and fell, the woman cried loudly for help, and in a few minutes a large crowd had assembled. They thought the man was shot, but his cries of pain soon revealed the fact that a small bottle of vitriol had been thrown in his face. He lay writhing in agonies too great for words. Those who saw him said it would be a thousand times more merciful to kill him than to try to restore him; but the law does not allow that. They picked him up, burned, scarred—the most horrible sight that could be imagined. Both eyes were quite destroyed, and every one hoped, in mercy, that he might die. He was carried to the hospital, where he lingered in terrible torture.

'Then all Paris was touched to hear that the woman whom he had engaged to marry had gone to the hospital to ask from the authorities the one great favor that she might nurse him. They were delighted, and the patient too. She took up her station by the bedside, the most devoted of nurses. Strange to say, he had made some little progress before she came, but after she took charge of him he seemed to grow worse. When the other nurses dressed his wounds with the cooling lotion it relieved them; it was noticed that whenever his *fiancée* dressed them his screams and shrieks were so fearful that even strong men could not endure to hear them. A suspicion came to one of the doctors that it could not be all right, and he watched her.'

Mrs. Norman's shining eyes were fixed on the speaker's face with a tension of anxiety painful to witness.

'The finale is so horrible,' continued the American lady, 'that I hardly like to tell it. The doctor watched her and found that whenever she dressed his wounds, instead of dipping the rags into the sweet, cooling lotion, she dipped them into the fresh vitriol, which she had concealed in the room, and had then stood by gloating over his anguish.'

There was a little cry of horror from all present, except from Mrs. Norman, and to a student of character her face was a problem.

Mr. Norman rang the bell.

'Let us have some more champagne,' he said, with a shudder. 'What a horrible story to tell. I hope to Heaven I shall never hear such another.'

## CHAPTER XLIV.

## FALSE AND TRUE LOVE.

‘I CANNOT think,’ said Mrs. Colonel Hudson, ‘what made me tell that story. It does happen sometimes that a certain horror seizes one—this did me.’

‘It is not pleasant, certainly,’ said Mrs. Norman. ‘In my opinion, she threw the vitriol at the wrong person. If he had ceased to love her because a fairer face had come between them, why did she not mar the beauty of that face.’ A silent shudder went through the guests; the woman’s face was so earnest, the light in her eyes so clear. ‘She would have punished him doubly had she taken the beauty from her rival’s face,’ she continued, ‘he would have suffered for his own sake and hers.’

‘Phillis!’ cried her husband, ‘you do not know what you are talking about.’

He spoke angrily, and looked annoyed. Agatha felt embarrassed; there was a sense of restraint over all of them; Mrs. Norman’s face was flushed, and a strange gleam shone in her eyes.

‘Can anything,’ she said, ‘be bad enough for the woman who comes in between lovers—very often between husband and wife; and, because she has an extra rose-tint or a beautiful mouth, blight two lives? Such a woman ought to be shot.’

‘I am afraid,’ said Colonel Hudson, ‘that if they were all shot the world would be a desert. Women love conquest, and many of them care very little how they make it.’

Agatha’s attention was fixed upon Mrs. Norman’s face; its changes of color and expression astonished her. Then Mr. Norman tried to change the conversation and succeeded; but Mrs. Norman remained strangely quiet.

The day afterward—a warm, bright, sunshiny afternoon—while they were driving through the Bois de Boulogne, Mrs. Norman turned suddenly to Agatha.

'What do you think,' she asked, 'of Mrs. Hudson's story?'

'I thought it most horrible,' she replied, 'and I thought also that it was not the best possible taste to tell such a story at dinner-time.'

'Do you think the woman very much to blame?' asked Mrs. Norman.

'I think her worse than a fiend,' she replied.

'She must have suffered very much to have grown into such a fiend. I suppose she loved him very much, and perhaps had been through tortures of jealousy.'

'That is not love,' said Agatha. 'I cannot think how people can give so beautiful a name to so-foul a passion. The difference between true and false love is this: false love knows jealousy and hate, and vengeance and murder: true love seeks only the highest good of the object beloved. I would not think of it, if I were you; it seems to have taken hold of your mind.'

'It is ghastly,' said Mrs. Norman.

She spoke of something else, but many times during the day she referred to it, and it seemed to be always present with her.

A few days afterward in the *Siecle* they read the story of a very romantic elopement and marriage.

'How long will that love last?' asked Mrs. Norman with a sneer.

'Forever, I hope,' replied Agatha.

'You may hope, but you do not believe,' said the restless woman.

And Agatha thought of her own love, which was to last forever and ever.

'I should think,' continued Mrs. Norman, musingly, 'that no woman ever loved any one as I did my husband. I thought him as handsome as a Greek god; a king among men. I worshipped him, and I thought he loved me. Do not turn away, Agatha; there are times when my heart is on fire, and unless I can give utterance to my thoughts I shall die. Despite my plain face, I was a romantic girl; I wanted to be loved for myself, yet my fortune was so great I was always afraid of being sought for it. I may tell you now,' she continued, 'that my husband, though well-born and belonging to a good old family (the Normans, of Birton), had no fortune; an income

of two or three hundred a year, and that not regularly paid, was all he had. He came wooing me ; and when I remember my passionate adoration of him, I wonder that I do not go mad. He did not seem to know that I had any money ; he never mentioned it, but said how dearly he loved me ; how pleased he should be to work for me ; and I—well, I did believe that, at last, some one loved me for myself. I believed it implicitly when he praised my poor, plain face ; I believed him, and was happy, and, in my blind worship, I married him, without any marriage settlement, happy in the thought of his surprise and joy when he found that he had married a great heiress. I must tell you that my fortune was exceptionally great. My father was not what the world called a gentleman ; he belonged to a profitable branch of the machinery business, and he brought out a patent which made him one of the richest merchants in Lisle. All that he had in the world—houses, lands, money, and everything else—he left to me, and I, by my own deed, placed the whole of my fortune in the hands of my husband.'

Agatha thought of the diamonds ; how cruel if they had been bought for another person with her money.

'I was happy,' continued Mrs. Norman, 'for a few weeks, and then I knew that my husband had married me entirely for my money ; that he had known all along I was a wealthy heiress, and that he did not love me. I cannot tell you what I suffered ; it is three years since, but every moment of the time is branded on my heart as with a hot iron. Then, when I found I could bear my life no longer, I went to him. I knew that I could not live without his love. I told him I knew why he had married me. I knew the whole story, that he had never loved me at all. I appealed to him ; I told him that I knew I was not so fair as other women, but that if my face was plain my heart was full of devoted love for him. I asked him to try to love me. I promised him I would be everything most kind, devoted and loving. I asked him to begin a new life ; some men would have been touched. He laughed. At first I thought I must slay him ; there must be something of the tigress about me ; but after a time his laughter ceased, and he said he would do as I wished.

'We were happy—at least I was, for some months. He was kind to me, attentive, took me out, at times spent an even-



ing with me at home, called me by loving names, spoke kindly to me—there were times, even, when I thought he loved me. I was happy. I worshipped him so utterly that one kind word from him, one look, made me the lightest-hearted woman in England. I forgave him that he had not married me for love when I found out that he was likely to love me. Ah! that brief, sweet dream they said that I should have a little child, and I fancied that would make him love me more.

‘What should you do to a person who came between you and your husband you loved so well?—who came with a beautiful face and glittering hair, and wiled the heart from you?—what would you do, Miss Brooke.’

Agatha looked inexpressibly shocked.

‘I did not know such things were,’ she said. ‘It is like a new world to me.’

‘It was a new world to me,’ she continued. ‘Just as I was growing so happy—just as I thought Heaven was going to bless me with a little child, I heard this story—no matter how I knew it, it was true—that a fair-faced woman whom he worshipped madly had come between my husband and me. I heard that he was mad over her beauty; that he followed her like a shadow; that he laughed contemptuously at me. Do you wonder that I went mad, absolutely and really mad—only for a few weeks, though, and when my senses came back to me my little child was buried. I found myself looked upon as a person inclined to be very queer and eccentric, and my husband half-admired, half-laughed at all over Paris for his devotion to the most beautiful woman in it. Do you wonder that I hide my poor plain face and stain it with tears? I laugh at myself and I hate myself when I think how I have tried to win him back from her. I have tried to make myself beautiful, and he has laughed at me for my pains. I live my life yet. I know when he is away from home he is with her—that he spends the greater part of his time with her—that he lavishes my money on her. They say also that she in turn is false to him. Now, what should you do to her!’

‘Nothing,’ replied Agatha. ‘There is nothing you could do which would not lower yourself—those wrongs are better borne in silence. It is a strange thing that the world never takes the wife’s side.’

'Unless she happens to be a beauty,' sneered the hapless lady.

'I have told you my story,' Mrs. Norman said, 'but never a word has crossed my lips to any creature before. I know that you will keep it a secret as I have done, and I have told you because I am desperate—I am afraid of myself. Do you know what it is to be afraid of yourself?'

'Yes,' replied Agatha, slowly. 'I know it.'

'I hope that having told you, and being able to bring my troubles to you, will soften the bitterness of my lot. The moment I saw your face my heart warmed to you; but when I saw how beautiful you were, I could not help wondering whether my husband, who worships beauty, had anything to do with your coming here. I know now how false and untrue such an idea was.'

'I am glad that I am of some use and comfort to you,' said Agatha. 'Ah me! what a different world this is from the one I lived in.' Her heart and thoughts went back to the pretty village, where the snow-white blossoms hung. 'I knew so many husbands and wives there,' she said, 'but there was never a quarrel, never any such horrible treachery as this. If the husband spent a little of his wages, or took a glass too much, there were reproaches and recriminations. If the husband came home and did not find dinner or tea ready, there were more reproaches; but such horrors as these never entered people's minds. Ah, Heaven! give me honest poverty, with its hunger, its thirst, and its cold, rather than such riches as these.'

'The world grows worse,' said Mrs. Norman. 'Men prey on men, and woman—well, much of it is their fault. This one of whom I have spoken to you—what do you think she deserves for coming between my husband and me—what do you think? If she had stolen my purse, the law would have punished her; if she had stolen my diamonds she would go to prison for it; if she forged my name, to penal servitude; if she killed me, she would be hung. Yet what are my money, my name, my diamonds, my life, compared to my love! She has stolen my love from me—what does she deserve?'

## CHAPTER XLV.

BUT FOR HER I WOULD HAVE BEEN A HAPPY WIFE.

**W**HATEVER it may be, she will have it, in this life or the next,' replied Agatha.

'But for her I should have been a much beloved wife and happy mother. Ah, Heaven! tell me what she deserves, and she shall have it.'

With kindly words Agatha strove to calm her, but the frenzy of rage and passion was difficult to calm.

Mrs. Norman at times received a few friends; she did not care much about it, as her husband was seldom, if ever, at home to help her. There were times when she was compelled to issue cards for an 'At Home,' or a musical *soiree*, and on this memorable day she had received several guests to a five o'clock tea. Agatha was one of the great features of the entertainment; her angelic beauty, her sweetness of manner, her lovely voice and finished artistic singing, charmed every one. She noticed herself that Mrs. Norman spent a great deal of time with a gossiping old dowager, whose puckered wrinkled face beamed with satisfaction. Agatha longed to interrupt them—experience was making her wiser; she began to understand more of the ways of the world about her.

She felt quite sure that the malicious old dowager was talking to Mrs. Norman about her husband; she knew it from the agitated expression, the changing color, the clinching of the hands, the wild gleam of anger in the eyes; she could read the absolute torture that the unhappy lady endured, and she saw the dowager took great delight in the torture.

She crossed the room. All the music died from her heart at the thought of how women delighted to torture each other. She remembered Valerie, and how she had gloated over her torment.

She overheard just the last words of the dowager as she reached them, and they were—'See her diamonds.' Agatha

wondered if the purchase of the Palais Royal had become known. She saw that Mrs. Norman could hardly control herself, her lips were twitching, her hands trembled. Agatha was frightened for her. She was thankful to have her alone—thankful when the last of the pleasure-seeking group disappeared. She went up to her and said, gently :

‘I can see that you have had a fresh trouble. Do not believe even half you hear. That mischief-making dowager has been talking to you, and I feel sure that she has invented half she said.’

That was, perhaps, the most uncharitable speech that Agatha had ever made; but, to her mind, there was something most horrible in the pleasure one woman took in torturing another. Mrs. Norman threw up her arms with a gesture of despair.

‘Do not speak to me, or follow me,’ she said. ‘I must be alone or I shall die.’

She hastened to her room, and when Agatha, in half an hour’s time, feeling anxious over her, went after her she heard such sobs, such passionate cries, as made her very heart grow sick. She thought of herself as she had lain under the myrtle trees, and her heart ached for the anguish of this other woman. To her great surprise Mrs. Norman appeared at dinner. On her face there was little trace of the bitter tears. She was paler than usual, and there was a determined expression about her mouth that Agatha did not like. Mr. Norman was present, but husband and wife hardly exchanged one word.

‘Are you going out this evening, Phillis?’ he asked, finding that she said nothing to him.

‘Yes,’ she replied, concisely, ‘I am going out with Miss Brooke.’

‘May the humble individual who addresses you ask where you are going?’ he said.

‘Certainly.’ She raised her head with an air of graceful defiance. I shall be delighted to tell you. I am going to the Theatre des Italiens. I hear that there is something to be seen there at which all Paris is greatly amused. I should like to be amused as well.

‘It does not take much to set Paris all laughing,’ he replied; but Agatha saw his face flush, and he bit his lip to keep back the angry words.

'I hear, too,' continued Mrs. Norman, in a cold, dry voice, 'that the actress Freda is there, and I should like to see her. Madame de Quince was saying here yesterday that her latest lover is a Russian duke, who has spent a fortune on her.'

His handsome face grew livid with rage, and when his wife saw that, her face brightened up with triumph.

'I never took any interest in the adventuress until to-day,' she said; 'and now I think that the woman who can coax his 'ducats and his diamonds' from a Russian duke is entitled to admiration.'

'It would be just as well if you talked about what you understand,' said Mr. Norman, fiercely.

'If I understand no other question on earth, I am well up in that,' she replied. 'Nothing else was discussed by my visitor.'

'Singularly good taste!' he said.

Agatha saw that she was driving him rapidly to a point of madness; she dreaded a scene.

'I am told,' continued the daring woman, 'that Paris amuses itself by the jealousy of the beautiful Freda's lovers, but that no one has any chance against the duke.'

Mr. Norman rose from the table.

'Will you not wait for dessert?' she said.

'I have had quite enough,' he replied, sullenly. 'If you wish yourself well, I should have no more of that kind.'

She laughed—a laugh that Agatha thought most horrible. Her eyes seemed to flash fire. She laughed again as her husband closed the door.

'I have made him suffer,' she said; 'but this is only the beginning. Now, Miss Brooke, will you prepare? I wish to be at the theatre in time.'

And she did not speak again until they were driving along to the theatre.

'We shall see the most famous actress in Paris to-night, Miss Brooke,' she said.

'Who is she?' asked Agatha.

'Mademoiselle Freda. They say that she has loveliness never equalled. To-night she plays in one of Dumas' tragedies. I should like to know what you think of her.'

They found a crowded house; a fashionable audience, everything most delightful; but Agatha's eyes were rivetted on Mrs.

Norman's face ; it was almost terrible in its hard coldness—like a mask of stone.

Suddenly there was a burst of applause that rent the air ; such a greeting as is only given to the queens of beauty and of song. Mrs. Norman gave one start ; she smothered the cry that rose to her lips, but her whole figure was convulsed and trembled ; the set, fixed, white look on her face was dreadful to see. Her eyes, glittering, hard and defiant, were fixed on the stage ; Agatha followed their glance. They rested on the beautiful young actress, who stood there bowing to the audience who greeted her so rapturously.

Agatha trembled in her turn. She recognized the face at once, it was the same that Mr. Norman wore in his locket, the same superb blue eyes and golden hair. Round the beautiful white neck she saw the diamonds that had been bought in the Palais Royal ; she recognized them, the cross, the necklace ; there was no mistake. Then she, too, turned white as death. She was face to face with horrible treachery and cruelty ; she knew that those jewels had been purchased by the husband, and with the money of the unhappy woman by her side. A hand clutched hers.

'What do you think of her ?' said Mrs. Norman, and her voice seemed like a hiss.

'She is very beautiful, but it is not a style of beauty any refined person would care for,' was the truthful reply.

'Do you see those diamonds ?' she asked again, 'should you think they are worth much money ?'

'I could not tell the value of a diamond,' said Agatha.

'I have heard,' continued the unhappy lady, 'that the beautiful Freda, as they call her, has the finest set of diamonds in Paris, that must be the set—how they shine ! Ah, how beautiful she is, her skin is like fine white satin. Look at the color of her face, it is as dainty as the beautiful pink that lies inside white seashells, and her eyes have a thousand meanings ; her mouth, men would call it adorable, and give their lives for one kiss from it : and the glittering golden hair, it is like a mesh for her lovers. Ah, me ah, me ! what is my poor plain face near that ?'

'Worth a thousand times more,' said Agatha, and she wondered if Mrs. Norman knew the truth about the diamonds ; if she did, no wonder she was so enraged.

Then the beautiful Freda came forward, and began her song. That voice is lost to the world now for ever more, but there was never like it. The sound could only be compared to liquid pearls; it was simply ravishing. There was no chance for man or woman who heard it. In its pathos, it wrung tears from the hardest hearts; in its ringing jubilation it brought smiles to every lip.

Mrs. Norman turned her haggard eyes to Agatha.

'What a glorious voice!' she said. 'Such a woman is a queen, by right divine.'

But Agatha would not agree.

'Virtue and grace make a queen,' she said, 'a far more royal queen than a voice and a face.'

'If that woman lost her beauty,' said Mrs. Norman, 'she would have no more lovers, no more men would crowd round her; they would laugh as they turned aside and say: 'She was good-looking once.' I should like to hear them say that about her, Miss Brooke. I am quite sure I am not a bad woman at heart, but I should like to see that dainty voice destroyed, the eyes and the mouth should wile no more hearts away—not one. You will not wonder that I hate her, when I tell you that is the woman who came between my husband and me. But for her, I should have been a happy wife; but for her, I should have had a child to love. What does she deserve?'

'Punishment,' replied Agatha; 'but from the hands of God—not man. Do not think of her.'

'Not think of her! Why, she is before me day and night, like burning fire. Not think of her! I believe that when I am dead my heart will burn with hatred of her.'

'It is not wise,' said Agatha; 'some women have no resource but to submit. I think it would be far wiser for you to turn all your thoughts and energies toward trying to regain your husband's love, than in hating your rival.'

'It is too late,' she replied, 'far too late; he will never care for my plain face now that he loves that beautiful one.'

'If he were very ill,' said Agatha, 'which of you do you think he would ask to nurse him, you or Freda?'

'Me, while he was very ill and wanted plenty of attention. Freda as soon as he was sufficiently recovered to admire her.'

'Why not leave him, if you think so very badly of him, and you are so unhappy?'

Then she was frightened at the tempest she had aroused.

'Leave him,' she whispered; and Agatha never forgot the sound of that whisper. 'Leave him—my curse is that I love him. I could not leave him if I tried. I love him with the fiercest love; I hate him with the fiercest hate. I cannot live away from him: I cannot live with him. I am in mortal anguish and torture. I can find no peace, no rest, and it is all owing to her. She came between us. She pretends to like him, to get money from him. *She* does not love him. *I* love him. I heard to-day that he had given her those diamonds. Do you believe it?'

But Agatha was shocked and dismayed at the glimpse into this tempest-tossed soul, dismayed at her own inability to help her; and when they returned home, Mrs. Norman seemed even more miserable than she had been before.

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## CHAPTER XLVI.

### THE JOKE THAT PARIS ENJOYED.

**E**VERY day affairs seemed to go from bad to worse in this wretched household. The infatuation of Herne Norman for the beautiful Freda was talked about everywhere. It was the one zest that all Paris enjoyed. Freda's caprices, her whims, her fancies were the sole subjects of conversation. Her caprices were, some of them, as beautiful as her face. She was just then the object of the idolatry of all Paris. Young, lovely, charming, witty, without the least restraint in word or action. Her tricks played upon her lovers were the amusement of all who heard them. She was a mimic queen. She had a large court of admirers. Her jewels, her dresses, her horses and carriages made her the envy of half the women in Paris.



Mrs. Norman said to herself :

'Who could compete with a bright, dazzling woman like this?'

She, too, seemed under a kind of infatuation. She went to theatres now two or three times each week, and sat mute, dumb, with her great anguish, never saying one word, but drinking in with her cold eyes the radiant beauty of Freda's face.

'I wonder, she said to Agatha, as they drove home after the greatest triumph, 'I wonder what he would do,' she repeated, 'if Freda were to die?'

'He would forget her in a week,' replied Agatha.

'I wonder what he would do if she had the small-pox, and it disfigured her? Forget her in less than a week,' she recited to herself, and did not speak again until they had reached home.

Then, looking wistfully at Agatha, she said :

'If he forgot her, do you think he would remember me?'

She longed to be able to comfort the desolate soul, to give her some consolation, to help her ; but she could not say yes to that question. She did not think Herne Norman would ever tolerate his wife again.

In one of the finest stores in Paris, a superb set of sables was exposed for sale. Rumor said they had been fashioned expressly for a great northern queen, who, however, preferred ermine, and these were for sale. The price, of course, was very high, but then sables made for an empress, of course, must fetch a great price. It was just possible that the story about the empress was a fiction ; it did not render the furs less valuable. Mrs. Norman read of them, then asked Agatha to go with her to see them.

The rich English lady was received with even more honor than some French princesses ; there would be no question of hundreds where she was concerned.

'I should like them, Miss Brooke,' she said. 'The price is enormous, but it is long since I have made a purchase for myself. I will speak to Mr. Norman first, just as a matter of form.'

And before night it was whispered among the ladies who cared for such things, that the rich English lady, Mrs. Norman, intended to purchase the famous set of sable furs.

"I have longed all my life for a royal set of furs," she said, and it will be a real pleasure to have those."

Agatha was only too delighted to see her take an interest in anything, so that she talked much about them. Strange to say, on that the only day on which she wanted to see Mr. Norman particularly, he did not come; he sent a note to say that he had a particular engagement, and should not dine at home.

"I must wait until to-morrow for my furs," said Mrs. Norman. "I need not hurry about them; being summer time, no one else will hurry."

In one of the loveliest of the bijou mansions of Paris, a very pretty scene was enacted that same evening. Beautiful Freda had a leisure night, and, as a matter of course, had given a dinner party; needless to say that Herne Norman was there. When the evening was drawing to a close, and the beautiful woman, her neck, arms, and shoulders gleaming like white satin, lay in the cozy depths of a crimson velvet chair, her golden, glittering hair and scarlet lips, her bewitching loveliness of features, her brilliant smiles, her languid grace, her biting sarcasm, all maddened the infatuated man.

"Beautiful Freda," he said, "let me sit on that stool at your feet for ten minutes, just while I tell you how lovely you are."

"I know," she said, "all about it; every one tells me; I need no particular information from you. By the way, Herne, why do you let that disagreeable-looking wife of yours come to the theatre so often?"

"I did not know," he replied.

"You should see to it; it is horribly bad taste of her," panted the beautiful Freda. "She comes and sits there and looks at me as if I were some strange creature. She does not look—she glares—a sullen, savage glare. If you do not manage better than this, that woman will do me some mischief. She looked the other night as though she would shoot me."

"She would not dare," he replied. "I wonder who it is that tells her these things?"

"Every old gossip in Paris will help just a little," she said, laughingly.

"May I come to-morrow morning to luncheon?" he said; "I have heard you invite one or two."

'You must bring a passport,' she replied.

'And what will that be?' he asked.

'The set of sables that all Paris is raving about. They say they were expressly ordered for the empress, whose husband presented me with my famous diamond crown.'

'And I am to bring the sables?' he said.

'Yes; you must not come without them,' she replied.

And that same evening, so anxious was he to please her, he drove to the furrier's, and sent the magnificent present to her.

As a matter of course, it was known before noon on the day following where they were, and Paris enjoyed a wicked laugh to think that the costly furs, prepared for the most stately woman in Europe had been presented to their favorite actress, Freda.

But Herne Norman had hardly reckoned on the cost and result of that present. It was when they met for the breakfast that Mrs. Norman saw him for the first time since she had made up her mind about the furs. She knew that almost fabulous wealth was hers; she never dreamed that he would refuse her money.

'Herne,' she said, 'I have seen a set of sables; the price is rather extravagant, I admit, but they are royal furs, and I have set my heart upon them; will you give me a check?'

No words can express his surprise; the glass he was just raising to his lips fell almost to the ground.

'Are all the women in Paris mad?' he cried.

'What have I do with the women in Paris?' she said. 'I ask for a check for the furs. I have plenty of money by me; but not quite enough.'

'I cannot be teased by writing out checks this morning,' he said, hastily.

'It is not teasing you,' she replied. 'It cannot surely be much trouble to sign a check, she said. 'You would do it at once if the steward or the cook asked you.'

'I have not the time this morning, Phillis. I will do it to-morrow.'

'Must I remind you,' she asked, 'that I am simply asking you for my own.'

'It is not that at all,' he replied. 'How hasty you are, Phillis. I will sign it to-morrow.'

'I wish for it now,' she replied.

'Very well,' he said sullenly, 'you must have it, I suppose. I will attend to it after luncheon. How much do you say?'

She told him the price of the sables.

'You are ambitious,' he said, 'to want the furs of an empress.'

'They will be worth looking at,' she replied, with ill-judged bitterness, 'which I am not.'

'You know best,' he replied.

He signed the check, gave it to her, and went out. He did not care to face the scene. She would be sure now to know that he had bought them and given them to the beautiful Freda. He honestly wished himself out of this dilemma which was about the worst he had fallen into. What a scene there would be. He had known long since, by her comments on Freda, that she was jealous of her, but now?

He was sufficient of a gentleman to feel very sorry, neither did he forget that it was his wife's money which had purchased this magnificent gift for her rival.

All Paris laughed again at the joke; it seemed to the Parisians that this English household had undertaken to provide for their amusement. It was certainly a magnificent notion that the outraged wife should drive to the fur store, check in hand, for the sables; it was a finer joke still to know who had purchased them, and where they were gone.

Mrs. Norman was disappointed; but the thing she could not understand was the half-frightened look of the proprietor and the laughing face of one of the assistants.

'Who has purchased them?' she asked, and could not understand why an evasive answer was given to her. When she did know, the wonder was that she did not die of the mortification; it would have been better if she had done so.

Of course she knew before nightfall; one of the many friends who hurry with bad news came to her and told her. She said little; she tried even to laugh, but none the less deeply had the iron entered her soul. She told Agatha.

'What would you do in my place now?' she asked.

'Nothing. I would pass it by with contemptuous indifference.'

'I cannot' she replied, with dry, tearless eyes. 'I must avenge myself this time.'

“Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord,” quoted Agatha; but it was to deaf ears.

Herne Norman did the most unfortunate thing he could do; he told beautiful Freda of the *contretemps* over the furs. She was amused with and then quarrelled with him about it. Handsome Herne Norman's reign with the famous actress was almost over.

Beautiful Freda said to herself that if by using the sables on the stage, she could mortify the wife of the man she wanted now to rid herself of, she would do it. Mischief-makers repeated it. A determined expression came into Mrs. Norman's face as she heard it.

The actress kept her word. In one of the finest acts of a play—the scene of which was laid in Russia—she had the imperial sables arranged carelessly around her. And the same evening a dozen different women took the story to Phillis Norman. She said very little; she laughed. But there was a look in her face not pleasant to see. The next morning, for the first time since Agatha had been in the house, she went out alone. Alone—and so plainly dressed, no one would have known that it was the fashionable Mrs. Norman. She was certainly not herself—her eyes had a wild, strange look—her face was lividly gray.

“Will you go out with me this evening, Miss Brooke?” she said. “I should like to see those famous furs on the stage; but we will go in disguise, either in the pit or the gallery—are you willing?”

“Yes, I am willing,” replied Agatha; but in her heart she wished herself a hundred miles away.

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## CHAPTER XLVII.

### THE SPELL OF A BEAUTIFUL FACE.

**T**HERE was something so wild, so uncertain, so strange in the manner of Phillis Norman during the whole of that day, that Agatha felt most uncomfortable. There was no one to whom she could tell her fears. Mr. Norman was

utterly indifferent to her, and she knew no one to whom she could appeal on the part of this hapless lady. She made some effort to prevent her from going out; she did what was very unusual with her—she went to Mrs. Norman's dressing-room and asked to speak to her.

Aline, the maid, was present, and Agatha dismissed her under some pretext or other.

'Mrs. Norman,' she said, 'do let me speak to you! I am not happy over you to-day—you do not seem to be yourself; you are not well.'

Instead of answering her, Mrs. Norman turned from her and looked in the glass.

'I do not look ill,' she said.

Agatha went nearer to her and laid her arm round the beautiful white shoulder; then, touched by its beauty, its white, fair skin, smooth and soft as satin, she bent down and kissed it.

Mrs. Norman started as though she had been stung: her face flushed a dusky red.

'Do not do that!' she cried; 'for Heaven's sake do not do that! You would make me human again, and my heart is turned to stone. No one has kissed me for the last two years.'

And Agatha drew back in sorrowful sympathy.

'Tell me,' she said, gently, 'where you went this morning?'

Another great, dull flush came over her face, then a dreadful pallor.

'Why do you want to know?' she cried, suspiciously.

'For no reason in particular,' replied Agatha; 'only that I was anxious about you, and you have never seemed well since.'

'I am not well,' she answered. 'There is a fire here in my brain and in my heart. I wonder if I shall go mad? Do people ever go mad over love and jealousy?'

'I have heard so. But you must not think of such horrible things,' said Agatha. 'Try to think that the sun shines, and that outside of fair Paris the land lies laughing in the midst of sweetest flowers.'

But the sad, cold eyes looked at her vaguely and did not comprehend.

'Give up going out to-night. You are not well; your face burns and your hands are cold.'

'I want the sables to keep me warm,' she said, with a bitter laugh.

'Never mind the sables,' said Agatha. 'I am quite sure that Mr. Norman is both sorry and vexed about them; I can read it in his face.'

Her own brightened just a little.'

'Do you think so? Ah! that comforts me. But she does not regret it. They say that she insisted on having this Russian play put upon the stage that she might display the furs. Paris may well laugh. What a scene! And I am supposed to be sitting in a box, looking on with calm, serene complacency, while she and the public enjoy the joke! What does she deserve?'

'Forget all about her,' said Agatha. 'She merely holds people by the spell of her beautiful face and beautiful voice. Beauty will fade and her voice die. Forget all about her.'

'I will, after to-day,' said Mrs. Norman, gravely. 'After to-night I will speak of her no more; but I want to see her in all the bravery of her furs. Just this one night and I will never enter a theatre again.'

Agatha thought as her heart seemed to fix on it, it would be cruel to thwart her. Perhaps she would keep her word, and after to-day, forget her.

'Why do you wish to go in disguise?' she asked.

'It is no disguise, it is only that I do not wish to be known. You do not know Paris as well as I do. If I were seen there to-night, in a box in full dress, no matter how calm and careless I might seem to be, every comic paper in Paris would have a caricature of me. I would not be seen there for the world, yet I want to see if it be true that she brings those sables on the stage. Just this one evening, Miss Brooke, then no more. It is very kind of you. There need be no disguise. Wear a common black cloak, a bonnet, and a veil. We will go into the pit. No one can recognize us. Your face will be somewhat out of place among the common people there, but mine will not; I look exactly like a tradesman's wife.'

It was quite useless arguing, yet Agatha had a certain misgiving which she could not explain or understand herself.

They dined together, Mr. Norman was from home, and during dinner there was very little conversation.

'You will not take a carriage?' said Agatha.

'No; we will walk to the cab-stand and take a cab.'

There was a strange, quiet intent about her that really frightened Agatha. She wished with all her heart that Mr. Norman had been at home; she would have gone to him at any risk and have asked him not to let his wife leave home. She was astonished herself at the difference dress made. Mrs. Norman did not look like a lady when her elegant figure was hidden by the heavy cloak; she looked, as she said herself, like a tradesman's wife.

'Do you not think,' she said, bitterly, to Agatha, 'that nature has been very cruel to me!'

'No, I do not,' replied Agatha.

This constant discontent and rebellion against the Great Creator angered her more than she could say.

Then they started. They soon found a cab, and drove to the theatre in silence. It was crowded even more than usual; there was hardly a place left, hardly a seat. It was only by dint of a heavy bribe that Mrs. Norman succeeded in getting in. On all sides they heard the same ejaculations, : 'Crowded house!' 'No room!' 'Beautiful Freda!' 'Russian sables!'

'You hear,' whispered Mrs. Norman. 'Even these people, the very *canaille*, have the story to laugh at. The outraged pride, the bleeding heart, the wounded love of a wife, is but a jest on the lips of men and women. What does she deserve who has caused all this?'

'Forget her,' said Agatha.

'I will, after to-night?' was the grim reply.

The only places they could find were two seats quite in the back of the theatre; but they were fortunate in this one respect, they could see all over the house. The boxes were crowded; it seemed as though half the aristocrats of Paris were there.

'Look,' said Mrs. Norman; 'you see all those women crowned with jewels, fair and gay, fluttering their fans, coquetting with their bouquets—among them are many of my so-called friends. There is Madame la Baronne, who meets me always with sympathetic eyes, and looks quite three volumes of sympathy for me; there is lady Sidney, who holds my hand quit tightly while she tells me the latest scandal about my husband;



there is the Princess Dalziel, who talks to me with tears in her eyes, and declares that actresses ought not to go to Heaven. Do you know why they are all here ?'

'To see the play,' replied Agatha.

'By no means. It is really to have a laugh and a gossip over me. What is so novel and interesting as the misfortunes of our friends ? What so amusing as a plain-looking wife, who has been what you may call distanced by a beautiful rival ? I know how piquant and irresistible it is. I have discussed such things myself ; but I am a proud woman, and the iron has eaten into my soul. They will look at and admire beautiful Freda ; they will laugh when they see the imperial furs. Then, when they meet they will say—"Poor Mrs. Norman ! what a sad thing it is for her ; but then she is so terribly plain."'

'I wish you could take a brighter view of things,' sighed Agatha ; 'perhaps some of those ladies have tender hearts, and true womanly feelings for others.'

'They do not look like it,' said Mrs. Norman, and most certainly they did not.

Then a storm like thunder rent the air, cries of welcome, showers of flowers, and, under that deafening applause, the most beautiful actress in Paris stood bowing and smiling for several minutes.

Beautiful—that is not the word—she was bewitching, fascinating, almost terrible in her imperial loveliness. She wore the famous diamond necklace and cross, her glittering, golden hair was studded with diamond stars ; there was never a fairer picture of womanhood than this.

'The diamonds again,' said Mrs. Norman. 'Why does she not wear the rubies that the archduke gave her ?' while Agatha was really lost in admiration at the beautiful vision before her.

'How well the people love her,' said Mrs. Norman. 'When will the people give over applauding ? What nonsense, she has not even opened her lips yet ; you see it is her face they are applauding, not herself.'

Indeed any *artiste* might have been proud of such a reception ; the ladies looked their delight ; there was a faint murmur of applause from those fair and fashionable ladies ; there was a special interest in beautiful Freda—she was supposed to have almost broken the heart of a plain-looking wife.

As beautiful Freda stood before her audience, the most superb picture of perfect womanhood ever seen—her tall, graceful figure, the magnificent neck and shoulders, the white gleaming arms bare to the shoulders, the wonderful face with its exquisite coloring; its power and passion, its gleams of tenderness and love; an irresistible face—no one who saw it ever forgot it. No wonder that thunders of applause shook the very walls, that enthusiastic cries of 'Freda, beautiful Freda!' rent the air. No wonder that the plain-faced wife shrank back, pale and trembling, when the superb woman bowed her queenly head and smiled in return for that magnificent reception.

The play, or rather operetta, was a very beautiful one. In the first act the lovely Freda appeared as a queen, and it was a treat to watch this accomplished actress; the audience held their very breath in wonder and suspense. There is no need to give the whole story. In the second act she appeared still a queen, but in disguise. She flies from her husband, the king, and from the kingdom. She was traced by her ermine, left in a peasant's hut, and beautiful Freda, in her interpretation of her *role*, had changed the ermine into sables. The first act was superb in its beautiful grandeur.

'She looks like a queen,' whispered Mrs. Norman. 'Ah, how I wish she had been one! It is a sweet face, but it could soon be destroyed—a fever, a burn, a scar over the white brow, a furrow on the chin, a great stain on one of those beautiful cheeks.'

'Dear Mrs. Norman, do not go on in that horrible way. You do not mean it?'

She drew back a little, and her pale face quivered.

'No, I do not really mean it. It would be a horrible pity if anything ever happened to her. A beautiful face is the work of God; no one should destroy it. See, now!'

'Now' meant that, in accordance with the play, the actress had placed a crown upon her brow.

'I am the queen!' she said, with a grand, simple dignity; and her impulsive, excitable audience almost went mad with enthusiasm.

How she was recalled! How the name of the beautiful Freda seemed to be on every lip! How flowers and jewels fell at her feet.

And as she looked at that moment, she was never seen again.

## CHAPTER XLVIII.

## A DISFIGURED FAVORITE.

WHEN came the scene which half of the ladies in Paris had crowded to see—the queen in a peasant's cottage, with none of the insignia of royalty about her, nothing to show she is not a peasant, except her refined, queenly beauty, her white hands, and the imperial furs, the value of which she had quite forgotten. She had looked lovely enough as a queen; she was far more beautiful as a peasant. All the glittering, golden hair lay like a veil over her shoulders; her white hands, laid in a picturesque fashion on the sables, were wonderful to see. There was a perfect storm of applause; her beauty mad-dened the people as they gazed upon it.

It was a grand act, wonderfully played, powerfully sustained. The hard, cold eyes that watched every movement grew harder and colder—they gleamed with hate and anger. Mrs. Norman watched the graceful, wreathing arms, the movements of the exquisite figure, the play of the superb face, and her hate grew. When she saw the sables on the stage, her face became livid, and was terrible to see.

'Those are the sables that should have been mine,' she said. And as she spoke, she knew quite well that the same remark was being made by almost every lady in the theatre.

As the play proceeded and the enthusiasm of the audience grew warmer, her face grew every moment more set, more rigid, more terrible. Agatha was grieved to the very heart for her; it seemed to her a needless prolongation of suffering.

'You have seen all you wished to see now,' she said, gently. Come home; you need not remain here.'

'Do you know how many more acts there are in the play?' she asked.

'Three,' replied Agatha, looking at the programme in her hands—'three.'

'I will go,' said Mrs. Norman, 'when the two are ended.'

Only Heaven knew what thoughts passed through the mind of that unhappy woman as she sat in gloomy silence watching her beautiful rival. Every now and then a great sigh came from her lips—every now and then a convulsive shudder seemed to thrill her—every now and then the white hands were clenched, and great large bruises left on the fair skin. What spasms of pain passed over her face?—what bitter thoughts made her lips tremble! There was pain enough in that one sad heart to have made the whole audience miserable if it could have been shared among them. That glittering loveliness was more bitter than death to her.

When the two acts were over she rose.

'I have had enough,' she said to Agatha; 'we will go now.' But when she rose she staggered and reeled, almost like a man who has taken too much wine. 'My brain whirls!' she said, and she was compelled to stand for some few minutes before she could walk.

Every detail of that evening was impressed on Agatha's mind forever. She remembered the crowded theatre, the sea of faces, the glitter of jewels, the waving of fans, and the sheen of rich dresses; she remembered the scene on the stage, as the glorious face of the actress turned to the people.

The next moment they were out in the cold air, a thousand stars throbbing in the night skies. They stood for some minutes under the white portico, then Agatha said:

'Would you like to ride or walk home?'

Mrs. Norman looked up eagerly, as one wakes from a dream.

'We will walk,' she replied.

Agatha understood it afterward, but at the time it puzzled her. They walked for some distance—then suddenly, and as though she spoke without knowing it, Mrs. Norman said:

'I wonder if the play is over.'

'I should think it is just finished,' said Agatha.

They walked on together; there were plenty of people in the streets, and as they passed one group Agatha, turning suddenly, found that her companion was no longer by her side. She thought, naturally enough, that she had passed on the other side of the group. For the first minute she felt no uneasiness. It was not an unusual thing to lose sight of a person in the

streets at night. She said to herself that she should be quite sure to overtake her on the way home.

Yet, remembering her strange manner all the day, she had a vague sense of dread and uneasiness. Could it be possible that Mrs. Norman had left her purposely? and if so, why had she done it?

She reached the magnificent mansion that was so unlike a home at last, but the mistress of it had not arrived, and Agatha felt sick with dread. Where had she gone? What had become of her? Agatha thought of the Seine and the morgue. She was quite at a loss what to do. She waited for some time near the house, but there was no sign of Mrs Norman.

The best thing that suggested itself to Agatha's mind was that she should go back again to the theatre; in some of the streets she should be sure to find her. Mrs. Norman would walk on, thinking deeply, without the least idea of where she was going. She could not have absented herself purposely; she had wished to go home. Agatha started off again. It was some distance to the theatre, and she walked slowly through the streets, looking to the right and left for the dark-robed figure she hoped to meet. She was in the busier streets at last, and there seemed to her some unusual excitement going on. As she drew nearer to the boulevard on which the theatre stood, she found a crowd; as she drew nearer still, a crowd so dense she could not move.

'What is the matter?' she asked of a respectable-looking man.

'Do you not know?' he cried. 'Oh, the beautiful Freda, only to-night the very joy of the people's hearts, and now——' Agatha turned faint with dread and apprehension.

'And now what?' she asked.

'I cannot tell you,' he said, with a passionate cry. 'Ask some one else.'

He turned away. On all sides she heard exclamations of horror, of dread curses, imprecations. What could be wrong?

'Is Freda dead?' she asked another man, and a cold, iron hand seemed to clutch her as she spoke.

'Dead? Ah, no, madame. It would be a thousand times better if she were.'

The cries deepened. It seemed to her, on the edge of the crowd, that some one came out of the theatre and spoke to the people. Whatever it was, what was said seemed to amaze

them, to drive them almost mad ; the cries and curses deepened, until they became frightful.

'Would you tell me what is the matter?' she asked.

But in the midst of that deafening noise, no one heard her. She never forgot the scene ; the sky above, with its myriads of stars, the tall trees on the boulevards ; the theatre with its brilliant lights still burning ; the dark, surging, maddened crowd.

They parted to let a carriage pass through their midst, which drew up at the theatre door ; then Agatha found herself close to a young girl, who was weeping bitterly.

'Oh, the beautiful Freda ! She was so kind to me.'

'Kind to you,' some one else said. 'When?'

'I am one of the ballet girls,' she said. 'I was close to her when it happened. She was kind to me last year when I had a fall and could not dance. She kept me till I was well. Oh, the beautiful Freda !'

'Will you tell me what is the matter with her?' asked Agatha. 'I have been waiting here ever so long and cannot get any one to tell me ; the people seem very much excited.'

'They are not only excited, they are mad,' said the girl, 'and if they get hold of the one who did it, they will tear him or her limb from limb.'

Again that terrible sickness of heart came to Agatha. What was it—this terrible deed ?

'What is it?' she asked.

'Do you not know?' was the reply. 'Some one—some fiend in human form—has thrown a bottle of vitriol at her.'

'Vitriol!' cried Agatha, in horror. 'Oh, Heaven, how terrible ! Are you quite sure—vitriol?'

'Yes, and they say her beautiful face is all burned away. She was so kind to me.'

For some few minutes Agatha could make no answer ; she was motionless with horror.

*Who had thrown it !*

'Is it not a horrible thing?' said the girl. 'To-night she was singing in the theatre there, with her beautiful face, and golden hair, and now, they say that even the doctors who dressed her wounds turned faint at them. Oh, the beautiful face !'

'Will it not kill her?' asked Agatha.

'They say not; they say that she will live, but so disfigured that human eyes could never look upon her. If the people get to know in Paris who did it, there would be a scene; they all worshipped beautiful Freda.'

Then came a surging of the great crowd, the carriage came, driving slowly through it, and the noise hushed as if by magic. Men took off their hats, and women sobbed aloud as it passed slowly by, for in it was the once beautiful Freda, two doctors and a nurse.

'They are taking her home,' cried the crowd, and in silence many hundreds of them followed the carriage.

The lights of the theatre were extinguished, the people dispersed, and Agatha was left standing almost alone. The people talked of nothing else but who had done it. They wondered if it was a jealous lover—that was the general style of thing—or some jealous professional; but then beautiful Freda had no enemies—every one worshipped her. As Agatha walked back, slowly, stunned with horror, sick with dread, she heard nothing else on all sides. The news had spread, the streets were filled with people, and no sound was heard except that one cry of beautiful Freda.

'She had many lovers,' said one woman in a group who passed by, 'but not one who would have hurt a hair of her head.'

'Jealous!' said another; 'no one was jealous of Freda—the stars are not jealous of the sun.'

One thing Agatha gathered, that was not known of the guilty one. No one had made any discovery—no one knew whom to suspect or what to think.

It was a night never forgotten in Paris; it was like a revolution. The Parisians were wild with regret that their favorite actress had been taken from them—they were wild, too, that a beautiful woman should have to suffer so terribly.

'It would have been far more merciful to have killed her outright.'

Agatha heard those words over and over again as she walked through the streets home.

When she stood once more at the door of the great mansion, a shudder of dread came over her. She was afraid to ring—afraid of what she might hear or see. She had to summon her

courage, to collect her thoughts. With a sudden desperate resolution she pulled the bell.

She need not have been afraid; the man who opened the door looked as usual; he had nothing to say.

'Mrs. Norman is at home, miss. She came very soon after you went away.'

Aline, the maid, told her that her mistress had gone to bed.

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## CHAPTER XLIX.

### HOW IT WAS DONE.

**A**GATHA went to her room at once, and took off the cloak and bonnet. The terrible fear that in its vague outline, had been far worse than any reality, was dying; how terrible it had been she could tell now from her shaking limbs and white face. She had not put her horror into words even to herself; she had not dared to give it a shape. Now she could see that her ideas and thoughts were all wrong. Mrs. Norman had entered the house almost 'directly' after she had gone away again; and those words had given her such a sense of relief as no words can describe. And yet why should they? What was this black weight upon her? What had she feared—what dreaded?

She stood there in her room, unable to move, her face white, her lips trembling—trying to steady her beating heart and trembling nerves, before she could speak to any one. A few minutes, and she was more herself; but this vague, monstrous fear was still hovering over her. She rang for Aline, who cried out when she saw her; the kindly, gentle maid was devotedly attached to the beautiful young English lady, and she looked now in wonder at her pale face.

'You are not well, miss; you look cold. What shall I get for you?'



'I should like a cup of strong coffee,' said Agatha; and Aline quitted the room to get it for her.

She returned in a few minutes, and said:

'Do you think, Miss Brooke, that my mistress would like some of this? She did not seem very well when she came in.'

'I sent for you to ask you if you thought I could go to see her, Aline?'

'I think so, miss. She told me that she had lost you somewhere in the Rue Cassagne. She was afraid that you would be anxious, but I told her that you were in and asked for her, and that you had gone back.'

Then came the words that Agatha longed to hear.

'My mistress came back directly you had gone, that is in about seven minutes afterward.'

Again that sense of relief from an intolerable fear.

'I do not think my mistress seems well to-night,' said Aline; 'she is very restless and very feverish. Will you take the coffee, or shall I, miss?'

'I will take it, Aline.'

She could not rest until she had seen Mrs. Norman, and she was glad of an excuse to get into the room. There were fervent prayers of thanksgiving on her lips as she went up the broad staircase, with its crimson carpet, its white statues and flowers; but even the prayers died away when she saw that white face. It was not so much white as livid with the most terrible palor; the eyes were not like human eyes so much as balls of fire. Agatha placed the silver salver that held the cup of coffee on the table, and then spoke to her.

'My dear Mrs. Norman, you look very ill,' she said, 'what can I do for you?'

'I am not ill—not in the least—only my enemies would say so. I am quite well.'

Agatha wondered why she spoke so hastily and resented the imputation of being ill, as though it were a crime. Mrs. Norman had never spoken to her in that fashion before.

'If I am a little unnerved,' she continued, 'it is your fault, Miss Brooke; you should not have left me. I do not blame you, but it was strange you should leave me in the streets of Paris.'

Agatha was too gentle; too grieved for the unhappy woman before her, to make any remark that could irritate her.

'I was very sorry,' she said, gently; 'I cannot think how I missed you.'

'You own that it was your own fault, that I did not go from you, but that it was really you who lost sight of me?'

'Yes,' replied the unsuspecting girl, 'I am afraid it was so.'

'You understand that I was in the house within a very few minutes after you had left it, Miss Brooke?'

'Yes I quite understand,' said Agatha, gently; and then a great relaxation came over the fixed intensity of the pallid face.

'I am glad you know it,' she said. 'One might have thought it queer that I should have been out alone.'

Her head fell back on the pillow, the trembling hands clutching the bed clothes, the burning eyes wandering idly round the room.


'Try to drink this coffee,' said Agatha, in the same voice she would have used to a suffering child.

'Coffee? No; I do not care for it. I am not ill, but I feel weak and nervous; strange, altogether. I should like some brandy, if you will ask for it.'

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## CHAPTER L.

### THE DEPLORABLE CONSEQUENCES.

NLY too glad to be of some use, Agatha went herself to get what was required. She was glad enough to see any change in her—to hear her ask for something; that dread terror which seemed to oppress her was horrible.

Mrs. Norman drank the brandy, and it relieved her. Some little color came back to her face, and her eyes grew less wild. Agatha sat down by her side and debated long within herself whether she should tell her what had happened or not.

'Have you heard any news?' she asked, suddenly.

'Yes,' was the reply. 'I heard some very sad and tragical news this evening—news that will grieve you, I am sure.'

'What is it?' asked Mrs. Norman.

'Oh, the hungry, despairing eyes that looked into hers ! the palid, terrible face.'

'It is about beautiful Freda, who will never be called beautiful Freda again.'

She could not tell the expression of Mrs. Norman's face, for she turned away ; but a very unsteady voice asked :

'Why not ?'

'It is too horrible to repeat ; it made me quite sick and ill,' said Agatha. 'Still, you have to hear it. Poor Freda is worse than dead ; some one has thrown vitriol at her.'

'Thrown what ?' cried Mrs. Norman.

'Vitriol,' replied Agatha. 'It made me think of that dreadful story of Mrs. Hudson's.'

But Mrs. Norman made no reply, nor did she turn her face to the light again.

'Tell me,' she gasped, in a few minutes, 'more about it.'

'I do not know much,' said Agatha ; 'but all Paris is roused as though it were a revolution.'

'Tell me more about it,' she replied.

'I heard such terrible things. I went back to the theatre ; the lights on the outside were all blazing, and the crowd was terrible. I have never seen one like it in all my life, and every man and woman in it seemed to have gone mad.'

'Go on,' said a hoarse voice, 'tell me all—all ; do not miss one word.'

'I know so little,' she replied, 'only that it was like a great wail ; the people had but one cry, and it was of beautiful Freda. A man stood next to me ; I asked him what was the matter, he said : 'Ask some one else, I cannot tell you.'

'How was it done?' asked the same hoarse, low voice.

'No one seemed to know. There is a dark passage running from the stage to the door that is used by the leading professionals. Generally speaking, beautiful Freda had a host of admirers with her ; to-night, by some strange coincidence, she had had some jest in the greenroom, and she hastened away, pretending that she would not speak to any of them again. It was in that moment it happened. She ran quickly through the dark passage, the gentlemen hastening after her, her footman standing with the carriage door open in his hands, the usual crowd of persons waiting to see her go off.'

'It was done in a moment, and so cleverly done that no one knows whether it was done by man, woman or child. No one knows, no one saw it, and the one who did it must have mixed adroitly with the crowd. It was horrible! The bottle was thrown in her face, and they say it was burned almost away.'

'She will not stand on the stage, and look like a beautiful queen again,' said Mrs. Norman.

'No, indeed, she will not. But what a horrible thing to do! The people round me were saying that her screams were so horrible, strong men fainted when they heard them.'

'Will she die?' asked Mrs. Norman.

'No, not at once. Poor Freda! to think how lovely she looked to-night, and now she is lying in such anguish that death would be a relief.'

'She will not sing again,' said Mrs. Norman, 'nor drive men mad with her beautiful voice.'

'No, never again,' replied Agatha. 'Poor, beautiful Freda.'

'I should not think you would be sorry for her,' cried Mrs. Norman; 'all the fire that could burn her could never inflict half the pain on her body she has inflicted on the hearts of others.'

'Do not say those cruel things, Mrs. Norman!' cried Agatha. 'I cannot bear to hear them. Surely that which has driven Paris mad with sorrow and anger is worth a sigh.'

'Who did it?' she asked again.

'No one knows, but whoever it is will meet with a sudden and violent death, if the Parisians have their way.'

'Why?' she asked, briefly.

'Because the people have resolved to tear the guilty one limb from limb, they said; they would tear down the Bastille itself to get at the one who did it.'

'They are curious people, these Parisians,' said Mrs. Norman.

'They loved Freda,' said Agatha.

'Why was it done?' asked Mrs. Norman. 'Does any one know the reason?'

'Every imaginable reason was given among the crowd. Some said it was professional jealousy, some said a lover's jealousy. I cannot tell which or what they meant.'

'Will you stay with me to-night, Miss Brooke?' said the unhappy woman; 'I am weak and nervous. I cannot tell why

but I am afraid my brain is not quite strong. Will you stay with me ?'

'Certainly, I will,' replied Agatha. 'I will stay with pleasure, and I can read you to sleep.'

But, though she read hour after hour, the weary head tossed to and fro, and no sleep came to the burning eyes.

For two days the unhappy woman kept her room, and two such days as they were surely never fell to the lot of any woman. She would have no one with her but Agatha, either by night or day.

'I am not ill,' she would say : 'I am nervous, and frightened by shadows. Stay with me. Do I look wild or strange ? It is fancy. Stay yourself ; do not let any one else near.'

She remained through two days and two nights, never leaving her ; but what days they were, and what nights ! She never forgot them. The nervous clutch of the burning hands, the terrified start at every sound ; and Agatha had no chance of seeing Mr. Norman, or telling him anything about his wife's illness. He never came near, but sent up twice each day to know how she was. Neither had she any chance of knowing what he thought or felt over beautiful Freda. She was struck by the avidity with which each day Mrs. Norman asked for the papers, every word of which she devoured. The people of Paris were still in a state of mad rage ; they still stood in the streets swearing vengeance against the one who had so cruelly maimed their beautiful singing-bird.

The accounts given of her were very deplorable. It was not true that the beautiful face was burned away. The bright eyes, that had wooed and won the hearts of so many, had not been injured. There was a terrible scar on her white brow, and another on one of the beautiful cheeks. The hateful fluid seem to have vented its fury on the white neck and shoulders ; they were horrible to see, burned and scarred out of all human shape. For some days her life was despaired of, and the bulletins issued by the physicians were read with far greater anxiety than if she had been a queen. The people were troubled to read that their once brilliant favorite lay moaning and praying that she might die.

Then the attention of government was turned to the outrage, and a reward was offered for the apprehension of the offender.

‘Penal servitude for life—nothing less the sentence would be.’

And Mrs. Norman, reading the comments on the affair among other things, read that.

‘It is a worse punishment than death,’ she said, slowly, and Agatha answered :

‘It is a worse crime than murder. It is a dastardly crime, —one that is the outcome of a weak, dastardly, horrible nature.’

Mrs. Norman shrank and shivered at the words. She raised the most piteous and frightened eyes to Agatha’s face.

‘Why do you say those things to me ?’ she asked.

‘For no reason except that we were speaking of it’ she replied.

But from that moment a great and terrible dread fastened itself with certainty on Agatha’s mind. Could it be possible that, after all, this miserable woman had committed the crime ? She had feared it at first but the spontaneous evidence of the servants, that Mrs. Norman had returned within seven minutes after she left, had completely destroyed the suspicion ; in that short time she could not have gone to the theatre and back. Just now it occurred to her that she might have driven there and back—might have hailed some passing cab, and have driven to a street near the theatre, and have returned in the same fashion.

She looked at her steadily. Ah, yes, there was guilt, deep horrible guilt, in that most miserable face ! Her whole soul recoiled with horror ; she could not endure to breathe the same air. She knew well enough how much the unfortunate woman had suffered, and could make every allowance ; but this was too horrible—no one could forgive it ; it was the outcome of a miserable, depraved, morbid mind. The pure and gentle nature of the girl revolted from any contact with such a criminal ; and Mrs. Norman read her thoughts in her face.

It was a strange coincidence that, while she still stood looking in hopeless anguish and dismay at the guilty face, Aline came to say that Mr. Norman wanted to see her at once. She hastened down and found him in the grand *salon*, pacing up and down with hasty footsteps, with a face so stern and white she hardly recognized it. He turned to her abruptly, and closed the door. He stood directly before her.

'Do you know,' he cried, 'what the people in Paris are saying about my wife?'

'No,' she answered. 'How should I? Your wife has been ill for two days, and I have been with her incessantly.'

'Ill,' he repeated. 'No wonder. Do you know that there is a rumor that she either did it herself, or employed some one else to do it? Great Heaven! *you* do not believe it?'

For Agatha's face had grown colorless, and she trembled violently.

'It cannot be that *you* believe it?' he said. 'Oh, for Heaven's sake speak to me? If there is anything in it, tell me, that I may know in time to—*to save her, if I can.*'

'I will tell you all I know,' she replied; and she gave him the history of their visit to the theatre.

Bad as he was, she felt sorry for him; he looked so unutterably miserable, so distracted.

'Is this true?' he asked.

'Yes; perfectly true,' she replied, quietly.

'Then she has done it,' he cried. 'Good Heaven! what will become of her? I never thought of this. I never dreamed that she had such passion in her. It will be the death of her. It will be the death of her, as well as the beautiful woman she has slain. What shall I do?'

In her whole life she had never seen a man in such terrible grief.

'What *shall* I do?'

'I cannot tell,' said Agatha.

'I wish to Heaven I was far away. I cannot bear it. The woman must have been mad.'

'Do not be angry with me,' she said, 'but if she is mad *you* have made her so.'

His head drooped on his breast.

'My sin has found me out,' he said.

And he stood before her the very picture of shame, confusion and distress.

Then he looked at her.

'If that story of yours be true,' he said, 'she is in danger.'

'I should think in the greatest danger,' repeated Agatha.

'I cannot think how the rumor originated,' he said; 'the reward offered has, no doubt, stimulated inquiries. If the

police should get to know, and anything happens, it is your evidence that would convict her.'

'I would not give any evidence,' she replied.

'You could not help it; you would be compelled. The only thing for you is to get away at once; go where you will, but let it be a safe hiding-place. Leave France to-day.'

'I will, if you wish it,' she answered.

'The only servants who know anything about it are, of course, the man who opened the door, and her maid. I can manage them. It will relieve my mind if you go at once.'

'I do not like leaving that poor creature up stairs,' she said.

'It is to save her I wish you to go,' he cried.

'I will go at once,' said Agatha.

'I will provide you with ample funds; you will do the only thing that can save my unhappy wife. I will make it all right in the household. Go at once, Miss Brooke. If the police make only one inquiry, you cannot go. Try to leave the house in an hour.'

'I must go and say "good-by" to that hapless, wretched lady,' said Agatha.

'I think you had better not. If she knew you were going away, there is no knowing what she might do; she might break out into some paroxysm or other. The greatest kindness you can do to me and to her is to go at once. Let me tell you how to destroy all traces of where you are going. Take a cab from here to the Rue d'Amsterdam railway station, take a ticket for some distant place—Genoa, Milan, Trieste—then take your seat in the carriage; get out unnoticed at the next station, and go across the country in any direction not absolutely public, taking good care to burn your ticket. No matter how much they try to find you, if you carry out these instructions they will never succeed. Will you do this?'

'Yes, I will,' she answered.

'Every sound I hear, frightens me. Do not let the Gendarmes find you hear.'

'I will not,' she replied. 'You are quite sure that I can do no more for you—nothing better than this?'

'Nothing,' he said. 'Your evidence—and you would be compelled to give it if you remained here—would convict her. It has convinced me. Good-by, Miss Brooke.'



'Good-by. If ever that dreadful affair ends better than you fear, be kind to her—in any case, be kind to her.'

'I will,' he replied, and there was something like emotion in his face.

The packing was quickly done ; but Agatha could not leave without looking once more at the hapless lady. She would not tell her she was going, but wicked and horrible as her conduct had been, Agatha could not go without seeing her once more. She went to her room before she put on her travelling attire. She found Mrs. Norman crouched on the window-seat, and while Agatha lived she never forgot the expression of her face ; her tender, womanly heart bled for this terribly stricken, desolate woman ; she almost forgot the enormity of her crime in the greatness of pity.

She went up to her and laid her hand on the two that were so tightly clenched.

'God forgives everything,' she said quietly, 'to those who ask pardon,' but the dull, leaden misery of the face never cleared, and Agatha went in silence.

She thanked Heaven when she stood once more in the free, fresh air—that atmosphere of crime and misery had stifled her ; she said to herself that she would far rather die than ever have anything more to do with such a class of people. She did just as she was told ; she took a ticket for Genoa, and then destroyed it. She made her way to the country house of the Countess de Tiernay, knowing that she would be welcome there. She wrote to madame, who joined her at once. Agatha would not return to Paris because the young count was there.

It was at the country-house of Madame de Tiernay that she read the finale of the horrible story she had been so deeply interested in. After all, it had been useless sending her out of the way, the evidence against Mrs. Norman was too strong.

The trial had caused the greatest sensation, not only over France, but over the whole of Europe. It was a *cause celebre* such as the public had rarely gloated over before.

While it lasted, no one spoke of anything else ; it filled all the papers and journals ; it was dramatized ; it formed the one sole topic, then it was forgotten ; a nine day's wonder that died before the nine days were gone. The result was the most horrible thing ; beautiful Freda lingered for many weeks in terrible


torture, then died, and the world lost one of the finest singers it had ever known.

Mrs. Norman was sentenced to penal servitude for life. The real criminal—the man who had driven his wife mad because he slighted and heartlessly abused her—escaped, as such criminals generally do. And Agatha longed to leave the country where she had witnessed such terrible scenes.

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## CHAPTER LI.

### IN A NEW HOME.

NTIQUITY has a beauty of its own, but there is also a great charm about a newly built, magnificent mansion, such as Lord Penrith had erected for himself in place of the tumble-down castle where his ancestors had dwelt. The Penriths were a very old family and very wealthy; they had been quite content living on their fine estate, with the season in town, a month or two at a fashionable watering-place, and a few weeks' yachting in Lord Penrith's fine boat, 'The Curfew.' Not a family about whom the society journals troubled themselves much. They held the first rank in their own county, and they were not ambitious out of it. When they went to town they met with the greatest respect, but they did not mix in any very exclusive set.

They were simple people, more than content with the sweet home life. They were famous for their kindly hospitality; Penrith Castle was always well filled with guests; and the singular thing was that these same visitors were not all famous for rank or beauty. Lady Penrith had one of the kindest hearts in the world; if she knew that anybody was in reduced circumstances, wanted change of air and scene, but was quite unable to get it, she was at once invited to Penrith. How many poor ladies lived and died blessing her!

The present Lord Penrith succeeded to his title very young; he was a man of sound practical sense, and the first thing upon

which he decided was rebuilding the old castle, or, rather, building a new one. It occupied many years in the building. It was designed by the finest architect in England; it had every modern luxury and improvement; it combined comfort and luxury with due attention to the picturesque. In fact, when completed, it was one of the most perfect mansions in England. It stood on the brow of one of the sloping Kentish hills, in the midst of one of the most perfect landscapes; scenery of every kind—sunlit valleys, and cool, green woods—the distant sea, the luxuriant meadow-lands, white cliffs, yellow sands, and the broad, beautiful river Rithe, which ran down the hill and fell into the sea. But if the house was new, its treasures were old. The portraits and pictures in the long gallery, the antique plate, the Chippendale furniture, the ancient china, the armor, the grand old family heir-looms—all contrasted oddly with the modern magnificence. To have every known improvement and every modern luxury in a room lined with old tapestry, was at times a little bewildering.

Both Lord and Lady Penrith loved their beautiful home exceedingly, and seldom cared to leave it. Theirs had been a love-match; they were one of the happiest pairs in England. For many years Lord Penrith had longed most earnestly for a son and heir; for many years it seemed that his longings would not be gratified. Two daughters were born—Beatrice, a beautiful, dark-eyed girl, with a thoroughly Spanish type of face—and Clare, who resembled Lady Penrith.

Then came a long interval of eight years, and the Lord of Penrith Castle had given up all idea of a son and heir, when to his delight and astonishment, Heaven sent him one—a beautiful brave boy, who was worshipped by the whole family. He was followed by a little sister, whom they named Laura. Lady Penrith said often that it was like having two distinct and separate families. Beatrice was seventeen, Clare sixteen, while Bertie was but nine, and Laura seven. Beatrice had made her *debut*; Clare was longing for the time when she could make hers; Bertie was soon to go to Eton, and Laura had a governess at home. That governess was Agatha Brooke, and at the time that our story opens again, she had been at Penrith three years.

Lady Penrith had been for some time looking for a suitable lady, one who could speak French and German—who would

at the same time be a companion for the elder girls and a governess to the young ones. She found all that she required in Agatha Brooke, who came to her most highly recommended by Madame la Comtesse de Tiernay. Miss Brooke had been three years at Penrith Castle, and the whole family had grown so warmly attached to her, it was doubtful if she would ever leave them. She had made but one stipulation with Lady Penrith, and it was she should never be asked to meet visitors or go to the drawing room in the evening. Lady Penrith kept her word, and never asked her. A happier household could not have been found. Lord Penrith was a kind hearted, genial, accomplished gentleman, proud of his magnificent house, pleased with himself and all his surroundings, passionately attached to his wife and children, a good friend and neighbor, also an excellent sportsman. Lady Penrith, without being absolutely beautiful, was a most charming and fascinating woman.

Beatrice Penrith was beautiful—the beauty of the family—with dark eyes and hair, a Spanish type of loveliness altogether, at which Lord Penrith never ceased to wonder. Clare was pretty, but had nothing like the brilliant loveliness of her sisters. Bertie, the only son and heir, was a handsome, promising boy, as full of mischief, and in a general way as tiresome as any boy could be; and Laura was a bewitching little girl of seven.

‘A fine family,’ the country people were accustomed to say; and it was perfectly true. The parents were noble, kindly, generous people; the children all with good-natured dispositions. The three years that Agatha had spent there was full of calm, and as far as possible, peace—not that she had ever forgotten—not that Vane was ever out of her thoughts,

She had learned more in the six years since she had left him than she would have learned in a life-time elsewhere. That terrible tragedy in Paris; the horrors that she had learned there; the light loves; the faithless husbands; the coquettish wives; the tragedies and comedies she had seen in Paris had opened her eyes to the world. She was no longer the simple, trusting girl, who had read the marriage service by her lover’s side, and believed herself to be his wife; she was as innocent and pure as an angel in all her thoughts, words and deeds; the difference was that in those old days she did not know that evil existed—

now she knew that there was more evil than good. She believed then there was but one Delilah, now she found that the character was a very common one. These three years had been like a refuge to her ; while they passed, she never missed one morning, noon or night praying for Sir Vane Carlyon. The strangest thing to her was that she had never heard anything about him. She searched the newspapers for a record of his name, but never found any. She fancied he must be abroad. During the season she looked in the *Court Journal* and the daily papers, but no mention was made of him ; the name of Sir Vane Carlyon never appeared.

Her own soul was more at peace. She had thought a great deal about her own case ; except that she had been so foolish, so blindly credulous, and so ignorant, she could not see that she had done any harm. She honestly believed that for a sin to be a sin it must be wilful, and she had never wilfully sinned ; on the contrary, if the choice had been offered her between offending God and death, she would have died. She knew and understood in its full enormity the offence of which Sir Vane had been guilty, and the victim she had been. She grieved with her whole heart for her fault so far as she was guilty, and she embraced with her whole heart, so far as it lay in her power, every chance she had of doing good, so as to atone for it. She was delighted to obtain the situation at Penrith Castle, she felt that she could do good there ; she could help to train four young souls for Heaven, she could sow good seeds in the young minds, and if by good teaching and good council and good example she could draw one soul nearer to Heaven, she would have done good service.

Agatha found that she had secured one of the most comfortable homes in this world. The charming beauty of Beatrice, the grace and sweetness of Clare delighted her ; with the little Laura she was more than pleased. Master Bertie looked at her as though measuring her strength.

'Are you our new governess ?' he asked.

'Yes, I am,' replied Agatha.

'I am going to Eton soon ; you will not have much to do with me.'

'Eton is the best place for boys,' she said decidedly.

'You are very sensible,' said the little heir, 'and I hope while I am at home things will be comfortable between you and me.'

'I hope they will,' said Agatha, gayly.

Already she delighted in the bold spirit of the boy.

'I should think,' he continued, 'that you would teach wisely ; but some of the governesses we have had have been awful.'

'Perhaps you have been just a little bit "awful to them,"' she said, laughingly.

'Ah, well ! I may have been ; but I shall like you. Do you know that your face is like a picture ? I say, Clare, look at Miss Brooke. You remember the Madonna that hangs in the gallery. Miss Brooke's face is just like it.'

'So it is,' said Clara. 'How rude we are to speak in such a fashion, Miss Brooke ; but you are just like that picture. I will show it to you.'

Her welcome had been of the warmest ; her beautiful angelic face and graceful manner charmed them all. Lord Penrith said they had a treasure. Lady Penrith treated her far more like a friend than a paid dependent. As time passed on she became the beloved friend and trusted companion of the two elder girls, and the very idol of little Laura's heart. The whole household saw and respected her desire for privacy. When no visitors were present she spent the evenings with Lord and Lady Penrith, but as that seldom happened, she had plenty of time to do as she would.

Now that she was once more in England, with English scenery around her, her heart turned to Whitecroft. She longed to see it once more to look upon her father's face, on the old gray church, on the stained glass window, and the fair young saint ; she longed for home, but she knew that she would never dare to seek it again.

To be at rest was something, and she was at rest here in this magnificent home, with the gentle mistress and the lovely children. She never dreamed of how that rest was to be broken, she never imagined the curious tragedy that was to change the sunlight of Penrith into darkest gloom.

## CHAPTER LII.

' TO LOVE, TO SUFFER, AND TO DIE.'

**D**URING these years not one word had reached Agatha of Valerie ; from her former life she seemed to be cut off dead ; no friend, or acquaintance, or correspondent remained to her, except Madame de Tiernay ; she wondered often and long what had become of the beautiful French woman, but the faintest indication of her fate had never reached her. From that horrible past, with its bitter memories, its cloud and shadow of dark disgrace, she turned in shuddering horror ; she tried never to think of it or remember it, but to devote her life to those she lived with.

No one in the household was so loved as the beautiful young governess. If any one fell ill she was the most tender of nurses ; if the children were not well they clung even more to her than to their gentle mother ; if one of the servants fell into trouble of any kind they sought Miss Brooke. Lady Penrith talked over all her *protegees* with her, Lord Penrith liked to consult her about his tenants, his schools, his plans for benefiting all the poor on his estate ; in fact, the whole household would have been quite at a loss without Miss Brooke.

Her quiet, gentle influence reached every one and penetrated everywhere. The time came at last when Beatrice Penrith was to be presented, and Agatha always remembered the bright April morning on which the family had set out for town. Penrith Castle looked beautiful in its spring garb ; the blue violets were peeping in the green grass, the larches were springing, the birds were on the chestnut trees, the fragrance and faint beauty of the lovely spring shone all over the land. Lady Penrith was in the highest spirits ; the grace, beauty, and elegance of her daughters charmed her ; she already foresaw, in the future, a series of brilliant conquests, to be followed by an equally brilliant marriage. Nor were her anticipations at all visionary. No young *debutante* ever broke on the world

of fashion with such a blinding light as did Beatrice Penrith ; her dark, beautiful face, the great dark eyes with their rich fringe, the lovely mouth that had the sweet laughing grace of childhood, the dimples in the beautiful cheeks, and one, when she laughed heartily, in the middle of the perfect little chin.

She was like a vision of delight to the somewhat jaded people of fashion ; she positively enjoyed everything. If she went to the opera or the theatre she was not at all ashamed to laugh or look sad ; when she was in the row every one saw by her shining eyes and bright face that she enjoyed the whole scene—the number of well-dressed people, the fine horses, the grand green trees, and the fresh, bracing air. Many wearied eyes followed the girl's graceful figure and lovely face.

It was the same at balls ; she entered into it *con amore*. She loved dancing, and it was a pleasure to see her.

The bright, happy, young face—the shining eyes—the slender, girlish figure, the air of thorough, complete, perfect enjoyment, drew quite as much attention as the loveliness of her face. It was considered a great treat to dance with her ; the light heart, the flying feet, the shining eyes were everywhere. She hardly needed dress or jewels to enhance her fair, girlish loveliness. It was some time since the gay world had rejoiced in the smiles of one so young and fair ; the beauties had of late been of a far more mature kind. Beatrice was quite new, and she had a most wonderful success. Lady Penrith was somewhat bewildered with it ; she had always thought Beatrice beautiful, and expected that she would make a grand marriage, but she was not at all prepared for the great *furor* that her daughter's bright young beauty did create ; she was quite as much surprised as delighted. She found that there was no need whatever for her to be anxious over her daughter's marriage.

In her heart she hoped the girl would not fall in love just yet ; she was but seventeen and her bright, fresh young beauty would last for many years ; but mothers' propose and fate disposes. Beatrice in her first season, in the loveliest spring-tide of her girlish beauty, in the fairest flower of her youth, fell in love.

The Earl of Kelso was some years older than herself, but that did not matter. He was certainly one of the handsomest



and wealthiest men in England. No less than three different fortunes had been left him. Honors had been thrust upon him. He was 'first at court and in the senate,' he was the most eagerly sought after of any man of the day. To be the Countess of Kelso was the ambition of most of the young beauties of the Court of St. James.

The Earl of Kelso had more money than he could count or know what to do with. He had houses and lands. He had several very magnificent estates, and the last inheritance Rylton Park, in Kent, surpassed all the others in antiquity and beauty; every rich gift had been lavished upon him, yet he did not look like a happy man; there was a shadow over his face. People said he had been wild in his youth, but there must have been something more than wildness to cause that shadowed face.

He had seemed indifferent to the beautiful faces that surrounded him until Beatrice Penrith appeared. Then her light heart, her gay spirits, her sweet childish innocence seemed to have even a greater charm for him. His sadness and melancholy disappeared when he was with her.

At first it seemed but the liking of a saddened, sorrowful man for one of the brightest and most beautiful children ever seen. Then it was plainly to be seen that Beatrice cared for him, that she was always delighted to see him, that she contrived always to keep the best dances for him, that when he was present she forgot every one else.

The world smiled approval on this love story, simple and sweet; no one knew what the earl thought; that he admired the beautiful young *debutante* was quite certain. Whether he would ask her to be his wife was quite another thing.

Beatrice was happy enough when that brilliant season was ended, and when she, with Lady Penrith, returned to the castle, she was hardly to be recognized. All the glamor of first love was upon her, her eyes full of dreamy splendor, her whole face transformed. There had been no proposal of marriage, but they were to meet again, at Ryde, at the end of the autumn, and in the meantime the Earl of Kelso had asked if he might sometimes write to her.

In her happy, sanguine young heart that was quite enough; no more was wanted.

It was strange that she took Agatha for her confidante, but she did so. Agatha was now a beautiful woman of twenty-six, retaining all the fairness and freshness of youth—no one would have thought her to be more than twenty, she did not look even that—her fair, delicate loveliness was of the kind that seldom dims or grows old.

Beatrice had a worship for the beautiful young governess, and she trusted her with the whole of her love story. She never said one-half so much to her mother as she did to Agatha; indeed, with lady Penrith she was just the least degree reserved, as young girls are at times even with the most tender of mothers.

To Agatha she revealed every sweet thought of her young heart, and as she listened to the gay, tender words of the girl her heart went back to her own love story; this reminded her of it, because Beatrice seemed to love her lover much as Agatha had loved hers.

She listened often until her eyes were blinded with hot tears and her heart ached with unbearable pain.

It was the sultry, beautiful month of July, when the cool shades of the green woods, the ripple of the broad river, the beauty of the deep lakes at Penrith were all that one could desire; there was cool shade to be found under the white rocks, down in the glen, by the waterfall, under the ilex grove, and beneath the lime trees in their full glory. Agatha, going towards the rose-garden, to give a message to the man at work about some flowers, saw Beatrice there.

She looked up with a smile that Agatha never forgot, and held out her hands.

'What do you think I have here?' she asked.

'Something that has made you look as bright as the morning and happy as an angel.'

'You are always thinking of angels, Miss Brooke,' replied the girl, laughingly; 'how is it? Why do you never say, "Happy as a queen?"'

'Because I have heard of queens who have never known one day's happiness from the day they lay in the cradle until they were placed in their graves.'

'This is my first love-letter,' said the girl, with a beautiful, vivid blush, 'my very first. I have had many little notes, you

understand, but never a love-letter—never one; it is my very first. My heart beat when I saw it; and mamma was so nice, she gave it to me without seeming to see the handwriting. She said 'Beatrice, dear, here is a letter for you,' just in the most indifferent manner. Was it not kind of her?'

'Very kind,' replied Agatha, gravely. 'I could not read it indoors. I wanted to be out with the birds and the flowers. The happiest moment of my life was when I broke the seal. What a little thing a letter is, to make a girl's heart so happy and light. There is not one but of poetry in it,' she continued, raising her beautiful face to Agatha's, 'not one; but he says he has thought of me every night and day since he left me. Now is not that beautiful?'

'Most beautiful,' replied Agatha, with a warm smile. The girl seemed to think that this was the only love-letter that had ever been written.

'He says,' continued Beatrice, 'that the morning sunshine reminds him of me, and that he shall count the days until we meet at Ryde. What a kind letter! What a happy girl I am! Ah, well may the birds sing! not one of them has a heart so happy and so blithe as I. Miss Brooke, sit down here among the roses and listen to me. I must talk about him, or my heart will break, it is so full of love. Do you think any one has ever been so happy as I?'

'Heaven help you, Beatrice!' said Agatha, for she saw that woman's doom was on her, 'to love, to suffer, and to die.'

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### CHAPTER LIII.

'MY HEART WENT OUT TO HIM.'

'**I** LIKE to talk about him,' continued the girl, in all the honest enthusiasm of her love; 'it is like reading a poem or listening to music. Miss Brooke, have you ever cared so much for any one? But no, I am sure you have not,' she continued.

'Why are you so sure?' asked Agatha, with a faint, sad smile.

'Because if you had you could never bear this quiet life. You know those mettlesome hounds of papa's—do you think, after the excitement of the chase, they could be content as watch-dogs? When one has drunk of the champagne of life who cares for its lees?'

Agatha looked dreamily at the young girl.

'It seems strange that you should know so much,' she said; 'I did not when I was of your age.'

'When you were of my age, Miss Brooke,' said the girl, 'you must have looked like an angel.'

'I did not act like one,' thought Agatha, with a keen pang of self-reproach.

'I often say to mamma,' continued the girl, happily, 'that if you took the pains over dress that we do, you would be handsomer than any of us.'

'I am glad you think so kindly of me,' continued Agatha.

'It is good to be young, and it is good to be beautiful,' sang out Beatrice. 'Life is full of good and beautiful things; love crowns them all.'

'Yes, love crowns them,' sighed Agatha, and she wondered what this blithe, happy girl would say or think, if she knew the perils and pains that love had brought her.

'When I was quite a child,' continued Beatrice, 'I thought a great deal about the future, and what it held for me, but I never thought of anything so fair as I find it. I am quite sure that in the whole of this wide world there is no other creature so blithe, so happy as I.'

Agatha never forgot the scene. The brilliant morning; the hundreds of roses, all in bloom; the singing of the birds in the trees; the ripple of the sweet green leaves; the laughing spray of the fountains, as the water rose in the sun-lit air; the odor of the thousand flowers that bloomed; the bright, beautiful face of the girl who had taken her out among the roses to tell her the story of her love.

'Do I tire you, Miss Brooke?' asked happy Beatrice. Ah, me! I hope not. It is so sweet to have some one to tell. Mamma is so kind, but she is a great lady—stately and gracious; but she would not understand. I should not think that great ladies like mamma ever fall in love, do they, Miss Brooke?'

'I should think,' said Agatha, 'that love is a blessing or curse that falls to the lot of every one.'

'It can never, surely, be a curse!' said Beatrice. 'I always think that ladies like mamma have to be wooed by proxy.—by grand ambassadors. I am so glad, so thankful, that I am only a girl, and not a great lady.'

'You will be a great lady some day,' said Agatha, slowly, 'Countess of Kelso.'

'I do not care for the title or the money, although people say the earl is very rich; that he had one large fortune before he came to this. It is himself I love.'

'That is right,' said Agatha.

Ah, me! How long was it since she had sat in the bonnie green woods, thinking the same thoughts, her heart filled with just the same happiness—how long? and now her heart was sere as the dead leaves which fall in autumn.

'I do not remember,' she said, gently, 'that I have heard the name of Kelso? Is it a new title?'

'New!' cried Beatrice. 'It is one of the oldest in England—one of the very oldest; but the late earl was a cross old man; he spent the greater part of his life abroad. He lived in Athens for more than thirty years; he was what people call eccentric. Mamma says that Lord Kelso—*my* earl,' continued the girl, with a happy laugh, 'did not care much about the earldom, although it has made him one of the first men in England. 'Do you know, Miss Brooke,' she continued, shyly, 'I do not think I like young—that is, very young men. Lord Kelso is not very young; he is not in the least old, but he is some years older than I am. Mamma says it is a good thing to be able to look up to your husband. I had many, what people call, admirers during my one season in town, but many of them were young. And none were half so nice as Lord Kelso,' laughed Agatha.

'No; none. There was a young soldier—young in years but old in fame, he had won the Victoria Cross—Captain Gerald Leigh. Have you heard anything about him, Miss Brooke?'

Agatha repeated the name gently to herself—Captain Gerald Leigh.

'No; I think not,' she replied; 'but then I have not been much in the way of English newspapers. In what way did he win his cross, my dear?'

Her face brightened, as it always did when she heard or spoke of noble deeds.

'He said it was simple enough, but every one else seemed to think it very grand. He says that many such deeds were done during the war; he was out in the trenches—if you know what that means, Miss Brooke, I do not—attending to some wounded men, and as he stood speaking to one of them, a shell, fired by the enemy, fell in their midst. If it had exploded they must all have been killed, but he raised it in his hand and flung it away, coolly, calmly, as though he had been raising a cricket ball. It injured him terribly. Some people think he will never have the proper use of his right arm again, but he saved countless lives. I heard that when the queen distributed the crosses, she was amazed to see so young a man, and she spoke so kindly to him; it was enough to make all men heroes. How grand it is to be young and brave,' said the girl, fervently, and Agatha looked with admiration at the bright, beautiful face.

'And this young hero—what of him?' asked Agatha.

'He liked me,' replied Beatrice, shyly. 'If I had never seen Lord Kelso, then I should have liked Gerald Leigh. Perhaps,' she continued, naively, 'you never heard a soldier make love?'

'No,' replied Agatha, 'I am quite sure that I never did.'

'They make the best lovers in the world. There is a romance about them; they are so brave and fearless. I thought, once upon a time, that I should like a soldier-lover; but now—'

'What now?' asked Agatha.

'I prefer an earl. Gerald Leigh was very fond of me. Mamma would not hear of him; although he is the eldest son and heir of Lord Swansea, the great politician. I shall always think that, from the first mamma wished me to be Lady Kelso.'

'How fortunate that your wishes and Lady Penrith's should agree,' said Agatha.

And looking at the bright, beautiful face, she did not wonder that Captain Leigh, Lord Kelso, and many others had lost their hearts; it was beautiful to sit and listen to the simple, earnest confidences of the young, loving heart. All the charm of youth and beauty was on the girl.

'Gerald Leigh told me all about his campaign,' she continued; 'but whenever mamma saw him talking to me, she took me away. He was what she called "a detrimental." I thought it rather cruel of her, until I saw Lord Kelso.'

'Then you did not care about this brave young captain?' asked Agatha.

'Not in that way. I was not in love with him; but I am half afraid, he was with me. If all soldiers make love as he did, why then I do not wonder at all the girls liking them so much. I think soldiers are quite different from other men; they are so brave and simple-minded.'

At your age, Beatrice, one idolizes everything,' said Agatha; 'but I should have thought the young captain, with the Victoria cross, would have been better suited to you than the earl.'

'Ah, no; the earl, Lord Kelso, is—the other half of my own soul!' she cried. 'Gerald Leigh was very handsome and distinguished-looking. I liked him all the better for the scars that disfigured his hands; but the earl—ah, Miss Brooke, he was fair to see. I have wondered sometimes,' she continued, 'what my life would have been if I had never seen him. I should have been content always; but I should never have known this greater, higher happiness—the crown of life.'

Was fate and life the same to every one? Agatha wondered. It was not long since she had dreamed over the same thoughts—since she had wondered what her life would have been like had she never seen Vane Carlyon; and now the romance of her life was over. She was sitting here in the sunlight, listening to the sweet, simple love story of another girl. How would it end?—in peril, as hers had done, or in peace?

'Do you think, Miss Brooke,' continued Beatrice, 'that we have a foreshadowing of the future? I do. I have read a great many stories and novels, and when I tried to realize what the heroes were like, I found I had made them all like Lord Kelso. Have I told you where I first saw him?'

'No,' replied Agatha, smiling, despite the pain at her heart. 'It was at a ball given by a friend of mamma's, the Duchess of Maytoun's. I had been dancing more, mamma said, than was good for me, and Gerald Leigh was looking so miserable because he saw there was no chance. Mamma had called me to her. "You look tired and flushed, Beatrice," she said. "There is nothing so unbecoming as a flush."'

'I thought to myself if mamma knew how Gerald Leigh had been watching me, she would not wonder at my face flushing. She bade me sit down by her side. I had nothing to do but


watch people, and I saw'—she paused for a few minutes, as though the remembrance were very sweet to her—'I saw a tall and very handsome man standing and watching the dancers; he did not join them, nor was he watching any one in particular. It struck me suddenly how much he was like my dream of a great hero—tall, with broad shoulders, and a princely figure, with a dark, handsome face. I think—nay, I am sure—that in all the world there is no face like it—dark, proud eyes, that softened at times like the eyes of a woman when she looks at one she loves, and a beautiful mouth. I know you will think I am foolish, but I declare to you that as I sat and looked at him my heart seemed to leave me and go out to him. I forgot all about the ball-room and my partners, mamma, Gerald and everything else. I only saw him, and I only knew just where he stood. My heart went out to him, and it never came back, Miss Brooke, and it never will. Does my love-story tire you? I have not much more to tell.'

It was as sweet to hear as the song of the birds in the trees, or the drowsy murmur of the bees under the limes.

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## CHAPTER LIV.

'YOUR EYES TELL ME ONE STORY, AND YOUR LIPS  
ANOTHER.'

'NE thing,' continued Beatrice Penrith, 'struck me very forcibly; the tall, handsome stranger looked very sad and melancholy; there was no smile in his eyes, and none on his lips. Something happened in the ball-room; I forget now what it was—some absurdly comical incident—at which every one laughed, but he did not even smile. I wondered if he had had any great trouble, or if by nature he was inclined to be melancholy, as some people are. I asked mamma, at last, who he was,—she knows everybody—and she told me it was the Earl of Kelso. I think he must have noticed



how I watched him, for soon afterward he joined a group of gentlemen who were standing near mamma, and I heard him quite distinctly and clearly ask :

“ Who is that beautiful child ? ”

‘ I did, indeed, Miss Brooke.’

“ Who is that beautiful child ? ” and my heart beat so loud and so fast, I thought mamma must hear it.

‘ I could not tell what answer they made him, for it was given in a low tone ; but I hoped some one would tell him that I was not really a child, but that this was my first season. You know I am tall, Miss Brooke ; and I was longing in my heart that he should see me standing up ; then he would not call me child again. How simple it all seems, does it not ? ’

‘ Simple enough, but with the elements of the direst tragedy.’

‘ Everything most noble and beautiful is always simple,’ said Agatha ; and the girl looked at her well pleased.

‘ Is my story noble and beautiful ? ’ she asked.

‘ I think so,’ said Agatha. ‘ Truth will make it most beautiful.’

‘ There is no fear that either of us will be wanting in truth ! ’ said Beatrice, with a glad little laugh. ‘ If ever truth was written plainly anywhere, it is in the dark eyes of my earl. Then, after a few minutes he came up to mamma—the Duchess of Maytoun introduced him—and he looked at me ; he said something, and mamma introduced him to me.’

‘ Ah, me ! have *your* eyes ever been dazzled by the smile of a face that seemed too beautiful ? Have you ever felt your heart whirled, as it were, away from you whether you willed it or not ? When my earl bent his handsome head and whispered his first word to me, I wonder that I did not cry aloud, I was so unutterably, wonderfully happy. How strange it is to remember. Do you know that the room and the dancers all faded from me, and I saw only his face ? I shall die looking at it just the same. I shall never see anything more while I live but that one face, which holds everything for me.

‘ He did not ask me to dance, but he stood by my chair talking to me—trifles live in our minds long after other and greater things die. I remember how he took my bouquet from my hands and caressed all the flowers with his lips.

“ Do you love flowers ? ” he asked, and when I answered “ Yes,” he sighed and looked sad, as though he were thinking

of some one else. I believe I was jealous, for a horrible pain pierced my heart, and my face grew white and cold. What would he have said had he known? I think he wanted to know, even then, how old I was, for he asked me so many questions about my first season and my first ball. He bent his handsome head over me and said—"Do you know that you have the happy, glad eyes of a child, Miss Penrith? Will you tell me how old you are?" And, 'Miss Brooke,' she added, with a happy laugh, 'I tried to crush him with my dignity when I told him seventeen. He did not laugh, his eyes clouded over with the expression of melancholy I could not bear to see. I wondered again—how jealous I am—if he were thinking about any other girl he knew who was just seventeen. He asked me to go through the rooms with him, for the Duchess had a magnificent collection of flowers. Mamma seemed delighted.

'He seemed to know everyone—all the beautiful women had smiles and bows for him, all the men a cordial word. He pointed out to me several new and most beautiful flowers, but he did not ask me to dance with him. I saw Gerald watching me with troubled eyes; I, myself, was like one dazed and in a dream. I remember wishing that the night might never end; that I might wander with him through banks of sweet blossoms for ever. At last—you know how tantalizing that waltz music is, the rhythm of it seemed to pass into my feet—he looked at me as though he had made some strange discovery.

"You would like to dance?" he said.

"Yes, with you," I answered; and I never stopped to think whether it was right or wrong.

'He laughed.

"With me? I have not danced for years," he said.

'And why not, Lord Kelso?' I asked.

"I cannot tell, I have not been light-hearted enough to care for it."

'Have you had a trouble in your life? I asked impulsively; again never thinking whether it was right or wrong.

"I suppose most people *would* call it a trouble," he said; and I saw that he was speaking more to himself than to me.

'I looked up at him without any fear.

'Try to forget the trouble, and be light-hearted again,' I said  
'I can hardly keep from flying when I hear that music.

"I could hardly keep from flying when I was seventeen," he said.

'And then we waltzed together.

'I had many partners during my one season, but none like Lord Kelso; and I enjoyed that dance I could not say how much.

'I wish,' I said to him, 'that all the men who go to balls danced like you.'

"Then I should have no advantage over them," he replied laughingly.

'Why do you want any advantage?' I asked; and he said the question answered itself.

'I forgot that evening to say good-night to Gerald Leigh, and I went home to dream of my earl—the happiest girl who slept that night under the light of the moon.'

## CHAPTER LV.

'ANYTHING CAN BE FORGIVEN TO A MAN WITH SUCH A RENT-ROLL'

**F**ERVENT tears filled her eyes, and the pain deepened in Agatha's heart. Would this love-story end as hers had done? She prayed Heaven it would not.

'Why do you always call Lord Kelso *your* earl?' she said suddenly.

Beatrice laughed.

'I knew a girl of my own age in London, she said—"Ginevre Dorlbyh:" she was seventeen the day after my birthday, and she is going to marry the earl. But her earl is old and—and horrible; he wears a wig, he has false teeth, and he requires, I forget how many hours, for dressing in the morning; his face is rouged, and he tries to make every one believe that he is quite a young man. When Ginevre and I talked about our lovers, she always said "the earl," and I

always said "my earl;" and now I am quite used to the title. I have thought of him and spoken of him so often as "my earl," that it has become part and parcel of my love. Do you not think, Miss Brooke, that so noble, so handsome, so grand a man in every way, that it is a most marvellous thing that he should have fallen in love with me?

'No, that I certainly do not,' replied Agatha, who thought the girl's grace and beauty, her candid, sweet nature, more than an equivalent for an earl's coronet.

'He did fall in love with me,' she continued: 'he came continually to Penrith House, and mamma was always delighted to see him. After a time I grew shy of him, and when I heard his voice or his footsteps my heart beat, my face would either flush or grow cold, my hands begin to tremble, and I run away. I remember one day—ah me! what a dreadful day it was! I was in the library of our London house, with papa; he was taking iced lemonade and asked me to hold the plate of ice. Just as I had taken it into my hands Lord Kelso was announced, and I dropped it—plate, ice, all went rolling away, and I thought in my distress I should have fallen. My father, you know, is rather impatient; he gave a little cry, but when he saw my face he was quite quiet, and said, gently, "poor child!" That made me more frightened than ever, and I avoided him lest he or any one else should know how much I really cared for him.

'He caught me one day. I was sitting alone in the great drawing-room. Mamma was out, and I heard his voice in the hall; he was asking for me. Without stopping to think, I hastened through the room into the conservatory, feeling quite sure that he did not know I was there. To my delighted dismay he followed me.

"Miss Penrith! Beatrice," he cried. "I want to speak to you."

'I was obliged to go to him, but I dared not look up, and my face was burning. I tried to look careless and indifferent.

'Good morning, Lord Kelso?' I said. I am sorry mamma is not at home."

"I am very glad," he replied: "'it is not mamma I want, but you—you, sweet Beatrice! Your eyes tell me one story and your lips another. Which is the true one? Your lips

“speak carelessly, your eyes tell me that I have not sought you in vain.”

I cannot tell you what more he said, it was all like a beautiful dream to me—a dream from which I never wished to wake. I loved him and feared him. I was frightened of him, and I idolized him in the same moment; but when he left the conservatory he was indeed my earl, for I had promised to be his wife. You are not laughing, Miss Brooke?’ she added.

Ah, no! it was not to hide laughter that Agatha had covered her fair face with her hands—not laughter, but bitter despairing tears. It all came back to her. She saw the bonnie green woods, the wild flowers at her feet, the earnest face of her lover; she could hear again the passionate ring in his voice as he read the solemn words of the marriage service, and it had all been a lie—a base, mean, well-acted lie!

‘No; I am not laughing,’ she replied. God grant to your sweet love story a happy ending?

‘I think he will,’ said the girl, softly. ‘My earl is like the Douglas of the old song, he is tender and true; his heart is as noble as his face is beautiful. I want you to see him, Miss Brooke.’

Like all other girls deeply in love, she was firmly convinced that a sight of her lover must be pleasing to every one else.

‘I shall be glad to see him,’ said Agatha, and she felt some little curiosity to see what he was like, this noble earl, who had so completely won the heart of Beatrice Penrith.

‘My noble earl has fair castles and broad lands; he has grand domains that are fair to see; he has all that the world values; but there is nothing like himself. I ought to thank Heaven; I do, but then I have only one voice. I wish all the little birds on the trees could join me in thanking God who had crowned my life with the noble gift of the love of a noble man.’

Agatha bowed her fair head as she listened; her life had been marred by the love of a man who did not know what the word noble means.

The sweet summer days passed blithely at Penrith Castle. Agatha could not help seeing that both the earl and countess were delighted over their daughter’s engagement, while Beatrice herself was so happy that it was a pleasure even to look upon her face. Snatches of blithe, sweet song were ever on

her lips. She did not walk as ordinary mortals, but it seemed rather as though her flying feet carried her at her will. The earl was expected in September, and the wedding was to take place at Christmas. Lady Penrith was not much delighted at that. Why not wait until spring; a wedding in winter was neither so pretty nor so picturesque. But then the earl said he wanted his wife; and did not care to study the picturesque side of a wedding. The eldest daughter of the Earl of Penrith could not, of course, be married like a mere ordinary person; there must be great state and ceremonies; nor can an earl be expected to prepare for the great event of his life without great festivities and royal bounties.

Philippa, Lady Penrith, was a proud and happy mother; her beautiful young daughter, after one season in London, had carried off the best match of the day. That, in itself, was triumph enough, though she tried not to be unduly elated. But that was not the best of it; Beatrice, her lovely, and beloved child, was marrying for love. Never was there a marriage made in Heaven if this were not made there. The girl loved him with her whole heart, so much so that the stately parents laughed at her graceful follies.

Lady Penrith would have been much better pleased had this wedding taken place in the midst of the season, at the most fashionable church in town. She did not like winter weddings.

'How could they,' she asked, plaintively, 'how could they be made pretty? True, there were plenty of evergreens, and those, with an abundance of exotics, were always beautiful; but there was a prestige about a wedding during the season. Royalty itself had often been present, and she would have delighted in that.'

So Lady Penrith talked in a plaintive, sweet voice about 'dear Lord Kelso' and his taste. She liked to hear her lady friends admire him for it. She liked to make the complaint; it showed that her daughter had really been sought after, that she was eagerly beloved, and that the marriage was *not* a match made from worldly motives.

Never was anything more complete than this happiness of Beatrice's. She was so earnest, so eager in her desire to fit herself for him, that no one could help growing intensely interested. When she found that Lord Kelso liked music, she

studied hard ; she begged Agatha, whose taste in music was perfect, to help her ; she had books that she thought would fit her to converse with him ; in fact, she laid out her whole life to please him. He was to come in September, and the wedding was to be celebrated a few days before Christmas Day.

All went merry as a marriage-bell. It was delightful to see Beatrice when she received a love-letter ; how she read them and cherished them ! No word from one of those precious letters was ever whispered to any one.

'She will be a great lady,' thought Agatha, 'and she will be a happy wife.'

Up to this time she had never had the faintest doubt ; but a little incident happened which made her anxious. Two of the 'county ladies,' both friends of Lady Penrith's, called during her absence, and as they had driven some distance, they went into the castle to rest. The day was fine, and they went into the gardens. Agatha, who knew them both well, went to see if she could do anything in the way of amusing them. As she drew near to the garden-chair on which they were seated, she heard, and could not possibly help hearing, what they were saying. Lady Tree had a loud voice, and Mrs. Darwin was deaf.

'I would not give my daughter to him if he were twenty times an earl,' Lady Tree was saying. She lowered her voice, but Agatha heard the words 'a terrible scandal—a great sacrifice—years ago—always a bad man.'

Could they possibly be speaking about Lord Kelso ? Her face grew pale, and her heart beat with sudden fear. It could not be of him ; why should she think it ? The world was full of men, and, unfortunately, there were very few good ones. Lord Kelso was not the only man going to be married ; surely, surely, it was not of him. If it was—if that bright, beautiful girl were to be made miserable ; if that blithe, glad young life were to be wrecked ; if that loving, gentle heart were to be broken, then there was no justice on earth, no mercy in Heaven. She could not, would not, believe it. Was there no truth ?—was every man false at heart ? She raised her face in passionate appeal to the blue skies ; they were blue and blinding—hard as the green earth. She longed to ask them if they were speaking of the earl, but she knew that neither of the

ladies would have answered her. They condescended at last to notice her, and, in answer to her inquiries, Lady Tree said she would like a little fruit and a glass of milk. Mrs. Darwin declined taking anything.

The two great county ladies considered a governess of no more importance than one of the rose-bushes in the garden.

Lady Tree murmured, as she went away, that she did not approve of beauty in a governess; and Mrs. Darwin said she would certainly not keep any one like Miss Brooke in her house; no good ever came of it. Beauty was quite a mistake in the lower classes. Then Agatha returned, with a fine bunch of purple grapes lying in the midst of green leaves, and then they thought her of so little account that they went on talking before her, just as though she had not been there.

'Did you ever hear who it was?' asked Lady Tree, in the most confidential tone of voice.

'No, never,' was the reply. 'Some insignificant person, I fancy. The whole matter was kept very quiet, but Lady Penrith must know of it.'

'Of course she does; but an earl is an earl. How long is it since it happened?'

'I do not remember. Mr. Darwin was in town when all the clubs were ringing with it. But there! anything can be forgiven to a man with such a rent-roll.'

'Should you think he cares for her?' was the next question.

'I should say not—merely a caprice. She is a most beautiful child—not very strong, or very wise; and he must be tired of worldly women. She will be happy for a few months, and then—'

'Then it will be like all other marriages, I suppose.'

And the two great ladies laughed. A broken heart in the gay world is looked upon as something almost comical. They did not notice that the governess shrank away, scared and frightened, with a world of trouble on her sweet face.

'Surely, oh, Heaven!' she cried, 'it cannot be true—so horrible a fate cannot be in store for that loving, beautiful girl! Is there no truth? Lady Penrith loves her as the very centre of her heart; it is not likely she would allow her to marry a man such as these ladies spoke of.'

Yet a lingering cloud of doubt hung over her. Better for the beautiful child to die than to live to see he-



illusions all perish ; better any suffering now than the horrible discovery afterward that she had married the most worthless of men.

Perhaps, though, she would never know. Agatha was growing accustomed to the ways of the world ; she knew that wealth, like charity, covers a multitude of sins. It was just possible that even had he been all that they had said, and worse, he might reform—turn out the most irreproachable husband and the steadiest of men ; then his young wife would never know—never know. Yet it seemed cruel, all the same.

An hour later Beatrice came to the school-room in search of her, all blushes, and smiles.

'Miss Brooke she said, 'leave the children a few minutes. I want to show you something that my earl has sent to me—so beautiful ! Come with me to my room.'

Miss Penrith's room was one of the most charming apartments in the castle—light, bright, and sunny, with a magnificent view over the park and the river. On the table lay a beautiful suit of pearls set so as to form white roses. Beatrice looked at Agatha in loving, wistful triumph, longing to hear what she had to say in praise of them.

'They are most beautiful,' said Agatha.

Her mind went back to the time when the man she loved so well, and whom she believed to be her husband, had bought jewels as fine for her.

'I am so glad you like them ! Mamma thinks it a pretty, very pretty and very appropriate present ; but I value the love that sent it far more than the jewels.'

Agatha looked up, with some anxiety in her face.

'How much you love him, Beatrice !' she said, gently.

'Yes, how much !' was the quiet reply.

'Do you think it quite wise,' Agatha asked, 'to centre the whole of your heart and soul on one object ?'

'I do not know whether it be wise or not, but it is very pleasant,' she replied. 'Do not be afraid for me. I have given my love wisely, to a good and noble man ; nothing can hurt me.'

Agatha spoke then, without reflection.

'Are you quite sure that he is a nobleman ?' she asked.

'I am quite sure ; he is a king among men, Miss Brooke. Why do you ask ?'

'Only from my great affection for you,' she replied; 'I beg your pardon, though; it was a question I should not have asked. What should you do, loving him in this fashion, if anything prevented your marriage?'

'I can soon answer that question,' replied Beatrice. 'I should die.'

But Agatha knew death would not always come when one desired it, and she knew, besides, how much one can suffer before it is time to die.

Beatrice was looking at her with a shadow on her bright face.

'Miss Brooke,' she said, 'I bring you to sympathise with my delight over my beautiful present, and you turn my pleasure into pain. Why are you so strange?'

'I can only repeat that it is because I love you so much, and marriage is always a lottery.'

'And my earl is always a prize,' she retorted, laughingly.

Then they discussed the pearls and their beautiful settings. Agatha resolved to say no more, it was quite useless; it served only to make Beatrice uneasy, and she evidently knew nothing of her lover more than she had been told, but she resolved to be on the watch.

'If,' she said to herself, with bitter tears—'if there had been some one to watch over me, how different my life would have been. I pray to Heaven that this loving, beautiful child may die rather than suffer, as she will do if she is deceived in her lover.'

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## CHAPTER LVI.

'LIFE WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN.'

**B**EATRICE PENRITH stood at the school-room window, and for the first time in her sunny, happy life there was a shadow on her bright face. Agatha was busy with the curly-haired children, and Beatrice was waiting until lessons were over and Miss Brooke had time to attend to her. A

shadow on her face, the sweet eyes clouded, the laughing lips firmly closed. Yet it was September, and Lord Kelso was at the castle. Great preparations had been made for his arrival. Beatrice had been in one long ecstasy of expectation. He arrived one evening when the sun was setting over the beautiful lime trees, which as yet had not lost a leaf.

There is something at times almost solemn and terrible about great happiness; so Beatrice found it. She loved Agatha very much, and when she heard that her lover had arrived she went at once to her. It was evening then; the children had gone to the nursery, and Agatha was busy with her books.

'Let me come in for one minute, Miss Brooke,' said a sweet voice, and Agatha looked up with a smile. The love-story of this bright, beautiful girl was the one pleasure of her life.

'My earl has come,' said Beatrice, with a blushing, happy smile. 'Mamma says that I am to go and spend half an hour with him before dinner. I have come to ask you if I look *nice*—really nice. I could not trust to my own taste; and he is very fastidious—mamma says he is the best judge of a lady's dress that she knows.'

'Then he cannot fail to be pleased with yours,' said Agatha. 'It is perfect; and you look well, because you look so perfectly happy.'

'I am happy,' said Beatrice, and there was something almost solemn in her manner. 'You cannot suggest any alteration, then, in my dress or flowers, Miss Brooke?'

Agatha went up to the beautiful, happy girl.

'I can suggest one thing, Beatrice,' she said; 'just take a little of your soul out of your eyes. Lord Kelso has only to look at them to see at once how much you love him—it is all told there.'

'That ought to be the very right thing,' said Beatrice, laughing and blushing; my eyes must tell him what my lips will always be too shy to utter.'

'All his welcome is written there,' said Agatha, and looking back to the old days, she wondered if Sir Vane Carlyon had read the same love and greeting in her eyes. 'You could not look better, Beatrice,' she said slowly. 'Go, and be happy, my dear.'

'Kiss me,' said Beatrice, raising her fair, fresh face to that of her companion, and Agatha, understanding all the yearning

for sympathy there was in the girl's heart, kissed the fresh young face.

'Now go, Beatrice,' she said; 'Lord Kelso will be quite impatient.'

She watched the slender, little figure, and the pretty, graceful dress; her heart and thoughts followed the young girl; books had no charm for her that evening. It was the old story over and over again. She wondered that the sun which shone at noontide, and the moon and stars which shone by night, were not tired of it; she wondered that the tall trees did not shake their branches in utter contempt of it. It was so sweet, so entrancing, yet so vague and empty. When did love end in anything but pain? The sweeter it was in the present, the more bitter in the future.

She closed the books, the restless fever woke again in her heart; she more quiet reading or study for her; her heart beat in great painful throbs, her face flushed. She must go out in the fresh, sweet evening air. It was not an unusual thing for her to do.

A door led from the school-room to the grounds, a pretty, quiet spot, where the children played under the shade of the great green trees. She went out now; nothing but the voice of the wind and the rustle of the river, the light of the moon and the stars; nothing else could comfort her when these fevers of unrest came over her.

It was a lovely moonlight night, and as she walked quietly to and fro under the shadows of the great trees, her mind went back. Ah, me! the repressed passion and pain of that loving heart. She was back once more in fancy at Whitecroft, watching the moon shine on the old church, and on her mother's grave; she knew just how the shadows fell over the old house, and in the woods; she was back again in the grand old chateau, and saw the moon shining on the mountains and lakes.

Where was he?—the man who had drawn and absorbed her whole life in himself—where was he?—the man who had taken the light of the sunshine and the beauty of the moonlight forever from her—where was he?

Looking, perhaps, in some face fairer than her own, loving some one for whom he cared more than he had ever cared for her. She had been one of many to him, he had been the only love of her life. She raised her eyes to the quiet night skies.



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'Heaven knows,' she said to herself, and the words stilled the restless fever. 'Heaven knows I never meant to do wrong.' Men might judge as they liked, Heaven knew best.

Then, under the influence of the sweet voices of the night, the bitterness of pain and the sting of memory past, her thoughts went back to the smiling, happy face of Beatrice Penrith. She was with her lover now, seated by him, looking at at him, listening to him, happily beyond the power of words to tell. Would it all end in misery, or was Beatrice one of the few who were to be happy on earth and happy in Heaven? Later on, when the night grew chill and cold, and she had gone back to her room, she heard the clear sweet voice ringing through the house, and she knew that Beatrice was singing to her lover. She did not see her during the whole of the next day—a party of visitors had arrived. Lady Penrith was far too wise to allow the lovers to grow tired of each other.

She knew that a man like Lord Kelso must have amusement, and that the simple, earnest love of a girl like her daughter would soon become monotonous to a man of the world.

With plenty of visitors to help to amuse him, all would go well, so that Beatrice was not able to pay her usual visits to the school-room, and Agatha had not seen her since the night on which she had looked so brilliant and happy until now that she stood by the window with that shadow on her face.

'Miss Brooke,' said Beatrice, plaintively, 'what can it matter whether those dear children know the past participle to the verb "To be," to-day or to-morrow? Do leave them a few minutes and talk to me. I have to go out at noon, and this is the only leisure time I shall have. I want to talk to you.'

Agatha fancied she detected a faint scound as of trouble in the sweet voice. She gave the children something to employ themselves with, and went to Beatrice, who turned to her with a sigh of relief.

'Thank you,' she said; 'you are always kind to me, Miss Brooke; it is so good of you to be so patient with me. I have no one to whom I can speak of my earl but you; I do not think mamma understands love as you or I do; she always speaks of marriage as "contracting an alliance,"' and a faint smile curled the girl's lips. 'I believe, for the first time in my life, I have a heavy heart, and I want you to tell me if it is so.'

'How can I tell you, Beatrice?' asked Agatha, half smiling at the girl's utter simplicity.

'You know everything about love, and pain, and happiness,' sighed Beatrice; 'I know you have heart-ache, because I have seen you when I am sure you have spent hours in crying. I am afraid my heart is heavy, and it should not be when my lover is here. I do not feel quite like myself, I am more inclined to cry than to laugh; there is something wrong with the sunshine.'

'And what is the cause?' asked Agatha.

The girl laid her forehead wearily on the cold glass.

'I can hardly tell,' she replied. 'I talked a great deal with Lord Kelso last night, and there seemed to me such a distance between us. I can hardly explain what I mean, but it made my heart ache.'

'A distance between you? I hardly understand, Beatrice. In what manner?'

'You see, Miss Brooke, my life has been so simple; I have lived under such love and care; I have never been away from my parents. There are sins and troubles in the world, but I do not even know them. I am such a child,' she continued, passionately—'such a stupid, ignorant, foolish child! while he knows everything. I wish I were more like him.'

'What you call ignorance is most probably your greatest charm,' said Agatha. 'However worldly a man may be himself, he likes an unworldly woman.'

Her face brightened. j

'Do you think so? I am so glad. I hear him talking to mamma—she seems to understand him—and they laughed. I could never amuse him as she does. Then I asked him why his eyes always wore that melancholy look, and what do you think he said?'

'I cannot guess, Beatrice.'

'He said, "I did not know that I looked melancholy, Beatrice; I shall not do so when I have you near me."'

'I persisted. Miss Brooke, I said to him, "It has nothing to do with me; the first night I saw you the same look was there. Why are you so sad when you have everything this world can give you?" And this was his answer—this was what puzzled me so. "I have lost something out of my life," he said, "and life will never be the same again."'



'The strange thing was that he did not look at me, and seemed to be speaking in spite of himself. When I asked him *what* he had lost out of his life, he seemed confused. "I talk nonsense, sometimes, Beatrice," he answered, and he would not say any more. What do you think he has lost from his life, Miss Brooke? My beautiful lover! what can it be?'

'Who can say? Perhaps a friendship—a hope—a cherished idea; everybody loses some part of their life. Do not let it trouble you, Beatrice.'

Then the lady's maid came to say that she was waiting for Miss Penrith; would she be kind enough to come?

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## CHAPTER LVII.

'I SHOULD LIKE TO KNOW EVERYTHING ABOUT HIM.'

'**S**HOULD you think, Miss Brooke, that I am jealous?' asked Beatrice the day following.

'No. I have never seen any sign of it, but I should not wonder much if the earl gave a look, or smile, or whispered word to another, you might be very jealous then.'

'Yesterday,' she continued, 'Lord Kelso showed us a quantity of fine diamonds; he wanted mamma's advice about re-setting them—they are to be mine. We began to talk about jewellery and ornaments, and I had noticed for some time that my earl always wears a locket—it is a gold locket, with one diamond. I asked him to let me look at it; he seemed rather confused at first, but I insisted. 'You may look at every locket I have,' I said, 'why should I not look at yours?'

'Then he took it from his watch chain and gave it to me. I opened it, and inside there was a lock of hair—pale, beautiful, golden hair. I could see at once that it had been cut from the head of some fair woman. I asked him 'whose hair is this?' and he answered—'it belonged to one who is now among the angels.' 'Dead, do you mean?' I asked. 'Yes, dead,' he

replied, and his voice was sorrowful—ah, as the sighing of the wind when the leaves die. Then an idea came to me—he said he had lost something from his life ; he said also that this hair belonged to some one who was dead ; it seemed to me that he had loved and lost some beautiful woman, to whom that hair belonged. I can understand what it is to be jealous—a pang like no other pain that I have ever felt went through my heart.

'You need never be jealous of the dead,' said Agatha.

'I could not help it—I—you will think me selfish. I know, but I could not bear to think that any one else had ever had a share in his heart. I could not bear it—living or dead. No woman must have any place in his heart with me.'

And it seemed to Agatha, as she had listened to the passionate words, that in a few short hours Beatrice Penrith had changed from a simple, loving child, to a passionate, loving woman.

'I am afraid I am not as good as I ought to be. I know that he loves me, and I should be content ; but I am jealous of that part of his life in which I have had no share. I should like to know everything about him from the time he first began to walk, until now. I cannot bear the past in which I did not know him, in which he had loves and hates, all dead letters to me. If there were so many faults I would forgive them all ; but I cannot bear to remember he has had a past that I shall never be part of. Do you understand, Miss Brooke ?'

'Yes, I understand perfectly,' she replied.

'I knew you would. If I were to talk in this strain to mamma, she would think me insane. I have told Lord Kelso every thing in my life—not that there has been very much, except, perhaps, about Gerald Leigh. He laughed about Gerald, and said he was the finest young officer in the Queen's army. He was not in the least jealous, as I thought he would be ; but when I had told him everything about myself that I could remember, and I asked him to tell me all his life, and everything in it, he looked—well, I must say he looked *perfectly* miserable.

"My dearest Beatrice," he answered, "our two lives have met now like two streams, but the one is a clear, sweet, transparent brook—the other is a muddy river ; the brook will purify the river." 'Now, what could he mean by that.'

'I should think the lives of most men would more resemble a muddy river, than a clear brook,' said Agatha. 'Perhaps he had no particular meaning. You, Beatrice, have known nothing but the beautiful, holy life and love of home; the earl has, perhaps, like other people, gambled a little, drank a little, bet and lost; and now, in the light of eyes so pure and sweet as yours, his errors look very big and black, indeed—the muddy river, in fact.'

The beautiful young face brightened at her words: Beatrice flung her arms round Agatha's neck, and thanked her for her sympathy.

'I am so glad you think so. I could not understand. And you are quite sure there is not a beautiful woman in it?'

'I cannot be quite sure,' replied Agatha, slowly.

'But you do not think he has had any love save me?' she persisted.

'My dearest Beatrice, how can I tell? I should most certainly say that whatever has been, he loves you now better than any one in the world; and if I were you, dear, I would trust him—I would not even think about his past. Trust him all in all; think of the present, and how to make him most happy—never mind the past.'

'You do not think—you are so nice, Miss Brooke—you do not think from what I have told you that he has ever really loved any one else but me?'

'What does it matter, Beatrice, if he loves you best now? No, I do not see anything in what you have said to induce that belief. Be happy, and do not make trouble, Beatrice.'

'You have not seen my earl yet, have you, Miss Brooke?' she asked.

'No, not yet,' replied Agatha.

'When you do, you will not wonder that I am just a little jealous. My only wonder is that every one does not like him as I do.'

Agatha laughed.

'It is just as well as it is,' she replied.

But when Beatrice considerably relieved and much happier hastened away, she felt anxious and depressed.

'It would have been much happier for her had she fallen in love with Gerald Leigh,' she thought. 'In all that she tells me

about Lord Kelso is something from which my whole heart rebels. I wish she had loved Gerald Leigh.'

Some few days passed then, during which she did not see Beatrice. The castle was full of visitors; there were continued gaieties—balls, pic-nics, parties of all kinds.

Beatrice had only just leisure to run in and speak two or three words.

'I am so happy!' she would say. 'Thank Heaven for me!'

And these few words always brightened the day for Agatha.

The marriage was one of the general topics of conversation, and several paragraphs concerning it had been published in the papers. Few people were ignorant of the fact that the Earl of Kelso was to marry the beautiful young *debutante* of last season—the daughter of Lord Penrith. The preparations for the marriage went on steadily; Beatrice forgot her doubts; the earl no longer wore the locket, with the single diamond that held the pale golden hair.

The happy days passed on, and brought with them no clouds.

'I wish,' said Beatrice, one morning, 'that I had studied music more carefully. I had no idea that the earl enjoyed it so much. I wish I had your talent for it, Miss Brooke.'

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## CHAPTER LVIII.

' I WISH I COULD ALWAYS BE NINETEEN.'

'**I** THINK it is a good sign when a man loves music,' said Agatha. 'Does he sing himself?'

'No; at least, I have not heard him. You know that we went to Liscom Priory yesterday, and dinner was delayed for an hour in consequence. It was the lovely time that poets call the gloaming, when I went down, and finding no one about, I went to the piano, in the oaken room, and Lord Kelso followed me.'

'That was very natural,' laughed Agatha.

'It was the happiest hour of my life,' continued Beatrice. 'He was so kind, so affectionate to me; and when he had been talking some little time to me, he said:

"Will you play to me, Beatrice? Music is music twice over when one hears it in the gloaming."

'I sat down at once when he wished. I did not sing to him, but I played all those beautiful old oratorio airs you like so much, indeed, I have learned them from you. He was quite silent, and I felt sure that he enjoyed the grand old airs, for he lay back in his chair with his eyes closed. Then I played the one you love so much. I forget the name, but these words go with it: "While I have eyes, I want no light." You remember it, Miss Brooke?'

Remember it! She could have cried aloud with the sick aching of her heart. She saw the old church, with its oaken roof; the great window, with the fair haired saint; she heard again the grand roll of the organ. Yes, she remembered it. Would Heaven, in His great mercy, ever allow her to forget.

Beatrice Penrith continued:

'He was so silent after that, that I went up to him, and when he opened his eyes they were heavy with tears—real tears.

'Now I have made you sad?' I cried.

'He looked at me for a few moments as though he did not know me—as though he had just returned from a land of dreams in which I did not dwell. Then he said:

"Is it you, Beatrice?"

'And I laughed. Who else should it be? My music has made you sad,' I said. 'I will not play for you in the gloaming.'

"Child," he said, "it is as though I had heard the angels singing."

'And then he was quite silent. Now, do you not think he loves music very much, Miss Brooke?'

'I should think so. You must do your best. You have great talent, and you are young.'

'I shall try hard,' said Beatrice. 'I am so pleased to know what pleases him! But Miss Brooke, I have tired you. You look very pale, and your hands tremble.'

'You have not tired me, Beatrice. I like to hear you speak of your lover. You could never tire me.'

How little the beautiful young girl, whose heart was full of her own love secrets—how little she dreamed how much pain and sorrow these few words brought back! It was strange that this great earl, the lover of Beatrice, should have the same taste as Sir Vane, whom she believed to be her husband. How often he had said to her, when the shadows of night were falling on the mountains, 'Play my favorite airs Agatha,' and if she omitted this one, he would say always, 'Now the one you played for me in the old church, Agatha.' How many times she had heard him murmur the words, over and over again, 'While I have eyes he wants no light.' Well, its only natural that many people should love the same piece of music.

'I shall rise very early in the morning,' said Beatrice, 'so as to have plenty of time for my music. I know I am jealous now, for I should not like any one else to please my earl so much as I pleased him then. You have not seen him yet, Miss Brooke?'

'No; not yet,' said Agatha. 'Penrith Castle is so large I might live here twelve months and never see one of your visitors.'

'Will you come down to the drawing-room?' said Beatrice, eagerly. 'Mamma often wishes that you would.'

'No; thank you. I should not like it. I must be patient. I am anxious to see him, and without doubt I shall see your earl soon.'

The words were a prophecy.

'A Fancy ball,' cried Beatrice Penrith; 'of all the beautiful ideas that ever emanate from mamma's brain that is the most beautiful; a fancy ball; it is the one thing I have always wished to see—it is the only kind of ball I have not seen. I am so pleased, Miss Brooke.'

And, indeed, Beatrice was at that moment so entirely happy that it was refreshing to look at her.

Mamma says how pleased she shall be if you will help me to choose a costume; do find something that will please my earl; the costume of some one who was very young and who loved some one very much—just as I love him.'

'I will think it over,' said Agatha.

'It is my birthday on the twenty-seventh of September,' she continued, 'and as it will be my last at home, mamma said I

might choose what form of amusement I liked best—private theatricals, charades, a ball, or anything I liked. The great desire of my life has been to see a fancy ball where people had wit enough to sustain the characters—and we shall all manage to do that. We are to send out a large number of invitations. I wish you would come, Miss Brooke, you would enjoy it so much, and I would find you plenty of partners. Why do you always refuse to join in everything when we should make you so welcome ?’

‘Do you not see, dearest Beatrice, the difference between us—your life is beginning, mine is ending.’

‘What nonsense,’ laughed Beatrice, ‘You are—every one says, who sees you—one of the loveliest women in the world, and no matter how wise you try to look, I am sure you cannot be more than twenty-four, and I do not believe that you are that.’

‘We do not all measure our age by years,’ said Agatha, ‘there are plenty of people who live ten years in one.’

‘Do come to the ball. I should like to dress you as Marie Stuart, or Marie Antoinette, or any of those beautiful queenly women.’

‘No, I cannot ; but if the dancing takes place in the great hall, I should like to see it from the gallery.’

‘That can be easily managed,’ said Beatrice ; ‘and you will help me to find a beautiful costume, one that will make the earl love me better, and will make him proud of me.’

‘I will do my best,’ said Agatha, and from that day until the day of the ball, Penrith castle was delivered into the hands of King Misrule.’

The invitations sent out extended half over the county, every one of note or celebrity was included, and, as every one knew why the ball was given, there were no refusals. The county people were very proud of Beatrice Penrith—proud of her beauty, and of the splendid marriage she was making. They crowded to do her honour. It was a time of pretty, fantastic fancies, and while it lasted, Lady Penrith saw more of Agatha, than she had ever done. Miss Brooke was so clever, so amiable, ready to do anything for any one. Indeed, it was a pleasure to ask her to do anything. Lady Penrith was always going to the school-room with sketches and suggestions ;

she entreated Agatha to go to the ball, but she as firmly declined. She said to herself that she had finished with the world, and she would have no more of its hollow gaieties ; she would do anything to help any one else.

'The costume of a Swiss peasant is very picturesque,' said Lady Penrith to her one day, and Agatha trembled at the words.

During this time she never saw the earl. The children spoke of him, they showed her the presents he had brought them, they talked of all the games they had ; but, by some strange chance, she had never seen him. The whole county seemed to be alive with preparations, and nothing was talked about in the country-houses but the fancy ball at Penrith Castle.

Every one had agreed over Beatrice—she must be 'Juliet,' the beautiful, passionate young daughter of the Capulets ; Juliet, who gave up her heart at one word, and never counted the cost of her love. She was delighted with the choice ; the dress would suit her girlish style of loveliness, and, above all, it suited her frame of mind. It was the only character, she declared, that she could have thrown her whole energy into.

Lord Kelso laughed ; his beautiful betrothed should have her own way, of course. If she were Juliet, he must be Romeo, and that, he said, was almost equivalent to a marriage.

'After such a very pronounced affair as that, appearing in public as Romeo and Juliet, there could be no getting out of the engagement for either of them.'

'Do you want to get out of it, as you phrase it?' asked Beatrice.

'Do you?' asked Lord Kelso, by way of answer.

'That I certainly do not,' she replied, with a blush and a smile, and a look in her eyes that touched his heart.

'After all,' she said, slowly, 'Juliet and Romeo were unfortunate lovers ; they both died. If I had thought that, I——'

'What,' asked the earl, with some little amusement.

'I would not have chosen it,' she replied. 'It is a bad omen, and I thought it such a good one.'

'I will not let you say that it is a bad omen, there can be no such thing for you and me, sweet Beatrice. Now smile, and be happy again, my beautiful Juliet.'



Certainly the young daughter of the Capulets could not have looked fairer than this beautiful young daughter of the Penriths on the night of her birthday ball. The dress of white satin, with its vesture of pearls suited her to admiration: she had never looked so well; but the greatest charm of all was the wonderful brightness and beauty of her face, the tenderness of the bright eyes, the love that seemed to lie in ambush round the sweet, curved lips, the passion and poetry that had never been so apparent as now.

Lord Kelso's eyes followed her in admiration.

'I thought I wooed a child,' he said; 'and have now the passionate heart of a beautiful woman.'

He was astonished, but kept his surprise wisely to himself.

Well might Beatrice Penrith look happy on her birthday. She had everything that heaven and earth could give her. She had beauty, youth, wealth and love; a beautiful past, and a more beautiful future. She had not a care or a trouble, and on the dawn of that birthday she was certainly the happiest girl under the sun. Letters and presents came from all her friends, but she valued most that which Lord Kelso gave her—a superb diamond ring, and the happiest hour of her birthday was the one she spent with him, when he placed it on her finger, and whispered to her of another ring he hoped to place there soon. The world was all light to her after that; she seemed to tread on air. It is pitiful to see the waste of true love in this world.

Never had Penrith Castle looked so perfect as on this day. The grand old hall, which had been used as a banqueting hall when kings visited the old castle, was used as a ball-room instead of the modern room built for the purpose. It was of enormous length, lofty and beautifully decorated; no pains had been spent in its decorations, tiers upon tiers of magnificent blossoms rose round the walls, tall palm trees stood in solitary grandeur, fountains of fragrant waters gave a musical ripple, the lights were brilliant; hundreds of colored lamps, some suspended from the lofty ceiling, others hidden among the green leaves.

'It is like fairy-land,' laughed Beatrice. 'There never was such a birthday or such a hall. I wish it were time to begin. Mamma, could we not dispense with dinner, and begin at once?'

Lord Kelso laughed.

'I do not think your programme would be appreciated, Beatrice,' he said. 'You will find dinner a very important event in the lives of most people.'

'I should be as happy without. I would sooner have a dance than a dinner.'

As he looked at her, he wondered how long she would be so happy—how long she would wear the same brightness on her beautiful face—the same youth in her heart.

It was a moonlit night, and the roll of carriages was something wonderful to hear. The castle was a blaze of light, the servants all in holiday attire. The ceremony of dining had been attempted, but none of the young people could eat, even though it was a birthday dinner. The important hour had arrived when the ladies of the household had gone to dress.

There was a murmur of admiration when the beautiful young Juliet appeared. Agatha had been in the dressing-room. Beatrice would not be satisfied unless she were there. The girl looked as beautiful as a dream, her face slightly flushed with the consciousness of her own loveliness.

Just as the last finishing touch was given to the dress, there came a rap at the dressing-room door. A maid, with a bouquet from the earl—but such a bouquet as seemed to come straight from fairy-land—and with it a golden bouquet-holder, set with finest pearls.

Agatha smiled when the girl bent her beautiful head and kissed the flowers.

'He is a princely wooer,' she said to herself.

'Now my happiness is complete,' said Beatrice. 'Miss Brooke, have ever you seen a perfectly happy human being before?'

'No,' replied Agatha.

'Then look at me now,' she continued. 'I am perfectly happy. Every flower in this bouquet—every leaf in each flower tells me the same story—my earl loves me, and only me. Oh, beautiful life, and beautiful love! I wish I could always be nineteen, and just going to a fancy ball! You have promised to come to the gallery, Miss Brooke?'

'Yes, I shall be sure to come.'

Just as she was leaving the dressing-room she turned a laughing face to Agatha.

'Mamma is always so careful and thoughtful,' she said. 'It occurred to her that there might possibly be some mistake over the costumes—there often is on these occasions—and she has ordered a box of costumes from London; they are in the red room. If you should change your mind, and be tempted to come, you will find something to please you. I shall look up in the gallery for you.'

She floated away in her beauty and magnificence. Agatha went to her room; she did not feel inclined to go even to the gallery, but after a little the sound of the music reached her, then it seemed to pass into her veins. She must go. The gallery ran around the hall. Surely behind some of the pillars or the statues she could find a place where she could see without being seen.

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## CHAPTER LIX.

'HE HAD SLAIN HER, BUT SHE LOVED HIM.'



GATHA had seen something during her stay in Paris and Switzerland, but nothing like this. It was as though the whole glory of the Penrith family culminated in this magnificent entertainment. The gallery which ran round the whole length of the room, was almost hidden from the view of those below by the quantities of banners and evergreens; the musicians themselves were concealed by a small forest of evergreens and camellias. For the first few minutes that Agatha was in the gallery, the whole scene was so novel and brilliant, that she was bewildered. She found a seat near one of the great twisted pillars that rose from the gallery to the groined roof—so near it she was almost hidden, yet she had a perfect view of all that was going on below. There were several people in the gallery—the steward's wife, the wives of some of the principal tenants on the estate, who had begged permission to see the magnificent sights; many of the household servants, with their friends; so that Agatha was not alone.

After a little her eyes became accustomed to the brilliancy and novelty of the scene. Lord Penrith, in the dress of Henry VIII, was the first she recognized; then Lady Penrith, looking very beautiful as Marie Stuart; and after a time she saw Juliet in the sheen of white satin and pearls, looking as lovely as a dream, a vision of fair youth and loveliness, the queen of the brilliant *fete*. She was dancing with some one who wore a Venetian costume—black velvet, with a mask. Agatha's eyes dwelt long and delightfully on that face; she never tired of watching it—its beauty, its radiant happiness, its constant change of expression.

'And now,' said Agatha to herself, with a smile, 'now I shall see the earl.'

She smiled again as she recalled the pretty fashion in which Beatrice always said, 'my earl.' However long she might live, thought Agatha, she could never be happier than she was that night, with the love-light on her face and her flying feet keeping time to the music.

She looked up and down the vast hall, but she did not see Romeo; she knew that his dress was costly and handsome in the extreme; Beatrice had spoken of it, the doublet of pale blue velvet, slashed with white satin, the cuffs and frills of finest point lace, with a gleam of diamonds half hidden, but she saw no such dress.

She wondered then that she had not been a little more curious over his outward appearance; she had never asked if he were tall or stout, or anything about him. She saw some of the most curious combinations that history could tell. Amy Robsart, a lovely blonde of eighteen, was talking to Queen Elizabeth, Lady Jane Grey and the queen of Scotland were on the most intimate terms, peasants danced with kings, queens with friars—it was a motley, charming group. Ah, there was a gleam of pale blue velvet; a tall, stately figure carried the dress with royal ease and elegance—a figure that had some strange charm for her.

He was standing—this tall, handsome earl, with the stately manner—before a young girl dressed as 'Snow-drop,' and certainly one of the loveliest girls in the room, her face dainty and delicate as her costume. The stately head was bent before her. Agatha could see that the girl hung almost entranced on every word that came from his lips.

'He is flirting with her,' thought Agatha. 'What would Beatrice say?'

She looked to see where Beatrice was, and when she gazed once more at the end of the hall, where the figure in blue velvet doublet had stood, the earl and the Snow-drop had disappeared.

In vain she searched again, the gleam of rich dresses, the light of rare jewels; the magnificent costumes of the gentlemen, the rich, fantastic dresses of the ladies were bewildering, but she did not see the blue doublet of the earl.

Ah, there was Snow-drop, so that he was not with her, and Agatha, without knowing why, felt some little sensation of relief.

'Why should I feel so interested?' she asked herself, wonderingly. 'I suppose it is because I love Beatrice so much.'

There was Beatrice, leading a quadrille dance; opposite to her stood a Venetian lady in a superb dress of black and gold; in the same square stood pretty Rose Aylmer, a brunette, in a pale rose-colored dress to represent sunrise.

Agatha was charmed with the bright, vivid coloring of this group; it was, she thought, the best in the room; and the music was so beautiful, it crept like wine through her veins, and made her long to go down and join the dancers. She could hear the murmur of admiration from the people in the gallery, and the light laughter and voices from below, mingled with the music, and made one.

Ah, merciful Heaven! what was that? She fell back on her seat, white, trembling, with the pain of death in her heart. What was it?

The quadrille was finished; white and blue, rose-color, gold, and black, seemed all to mingle for one moment, then to float away. She saw the doublet of blue velvet by the side of Beatrice; she saw Beatrice turn with a bright smile to welcome her lover; she saw him bend his stately head and whisper words that brought the loveliest bloom to her face. Then suddenly he turned his head, and she saw the face of Vane Carlyon.

Oh, merciful Heaven! it could not be. Thick, cold drops of anguish rose to her brow; it was as though a hand of cold iron had seized her heart and held it still. Then, when the chill and the pallor of death had gone from her, she looked again.

He had taken Beatrice half way down the room, and they were sitting together in a pretty little alcove formed by a group of large camellias. With difficulty she repressed the cry that rose to her lips; she left her seat and clung with trembling hands to the railing of the gallery.

'I am mad!' she said to herself—'I am mad! My eyes have played me false; they have deceived me. That cannot be Vane, my lover, who is, before Heaven, my husband; it could not be!' She stood there, her beautiful face white with anguish, her eyes full of terrified wonder, her whole frame trembling like a leaf in the wind. 'Oh, Heaven, be pitiful to me!' she cried; 'let me see aright; take the veil from my eyes—let me see!'

It was Vane's face. Could she ever forget the proud, patriotic beauty—the charm of the dark, straight brows—the fire, passion and tenderness of the eyes? Could she ever forget the beauty of the mouth that could utter words at once so sweet and so false?

She knew the very attitude. How many thousand times had he bent over her with that same air of deference and homage—with that same courteous grace and tenderness?

A bitter sense of desolation and anguish swept over her. Ah, Vane, so well beloved! ah, beautiful young lover, who had wooed her with such passionate wooing! She could have stretched out her hands to him with a great, bitter cry. He had slain her—the loving heart, the pure conscience, the angelic innocence, the fair name that had been held in repute as the name of a saint. He had destroyed all that—he had slain her; but she was a woman, and she loved him. Her heart rose to her lips in a long, low moan, drowned by the clash of music.

'Vane!' she could not help the cry, but no one heard it; that brilliant ball-room was not the place for a tragedy. 'Vane!' and this time the word came like a wail from her lips. The last time she saw him he had held her in his arms clasped to his heart, he had kissed her a hundred times, he had whispered sweetest words to her, and now—the same looks, the same words were for another—and yet not the same. The Vane who had looked in her face and kissed her as he murmured sweet words to her had no shadow in his eyes, no deep lines of care on his brow as this Vane had—no shadow in the

brightness of his smile. This Vane was handsome, brilliant, courteous; but he did not look happy, even with that lovely young girl by his side—not happy.

Ah, no; there were lines of pain on his face, there were deep shadows in his eyes, he was not the Vane who carried the light of the fresh young morning in his face in the bonnie woods of Whitcroft; he was changed, and she saw that some great sorrow had changed him.

'It cannot be Vane!' How idly she was dreaming!—it could but be a striking resemblance. She had often read of such. How could Vane Carlyon be the Earl of Kelso?

'My earl!' the words seemed to beat against her brain, to rush with the rush of a mighty river through her ears. 'My earl!' Great Heaven! *whose* was he, the handsome, kingly man sitting there by the side of the beautiful young *fiancée*?

Now, let her calm her trembling nerves, and still the throbbing pulse and the madly beating heart; she could not think while she was in that fever of agitation; she sat down again and tried to think—tried to drive the mist from her eyes.

'Help me, oh Heaven, to see clearly!' she cried again—'take the mist from my eyes.'

The music seemed to sound from afar off, the lights grew dim, a sense of intolerable anguish and faintness came over her, from which, with difficulty, she roused herself.

Then by degrees a great calm came over her—there was so much at stake. Not life—something dearer than life. Her senses grew calm and clear; still her eyes never left for one moment the proud face of the handsome earl. He had slain the best part of her, he had blighted her life, he had spoiled this world, and had almost closed the gates of Heaven against her—for that she must hate him; but she had given her heart to him; she could recall his love, his caresses, his passionate worship of herself—and for that she must love him. She remembered how sweet his whispered words were, how sweet his caresses. Life had never held anything sweeter than his love.

She longed with the passionate longing of a woman's heart to hear his voice once more, to be near him, to feel the clasp of his hands, the touch of his lips. And then she remembered it had all been false, he had deceived her; his love for

her had been a mock love, his marriage a mock marriage. The young, beautiful, high-born girl by his side was to be his wife, not she, and again from her white lips came a low moan that was drowned in the sweet, clashing music.

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 CHAPTER LX.

‘AS THOUGH SOME GREAT WEIGHT WERE ON HIS MIND.’

THEY were gone, the earl and Beatrice ; Agatha had closed her eyes for one moment to keep back the hot, smarting tears, and when she opened them again the alcove was empty ; they were gone, and the vast hall was filled with the ‘long drawn-out sweetness’ of a dreamy, German waltz, so sweet, yet so sad, it seemed that one must dance with tears. She bent over the carved rail, and then saw them. They were waltzing together, the handsomest pair in the room—he so tall and stately, she so fair and graceful—the blue velvet and the white satin, the dark head and the fair face presenting such a contrast—a contrast that was yet all beautiful harmony.

A fierce pain stabbed the gentle heart ; she had borne much, but she could not bear to see his arms round Beatrice—to see his eyes bent on her with admiring love—to see his face touching her hair. She had talked of jealousy—she knew not what it was. That was her place—had been her place for years—and no one should take it from her.

‘Vane, Vane !’

But the sweet, sad music drowned the sweet, sad cry.

Then slowly, and by degrees the thought of it all came over her: How could she stand by in silence and see this innocent, loving-hearted girl sacrificed—how could she allow this marriage to go on ? If there was any truth, any justice, he was her husband ; and if he were not, then he was so stained and shamed by his sin, he was unworthy the love of a pure-minded girl.



As she sat there, watching the dancers, she thought of all that she had heard of Lord Kelso, of all that Beatrice had told her.

'If I had had my senses I should have suspected it before,' she said to herself; 'it was my hair he carried in the locket. I remember the day he cut it off and placed it there. My hair, though the gold is dimmed now; and he said that he had lost something from his life. It was I whom he had lost—then he loves me and remembers me still. When Beatrice played my favorite airs to him, she found tears in his eyes—they were for me—for me! It is Vane—there can be no more doubt, no more uncertainty—it is Vane, and I ought to have known it before; but how comes he to be Lord Kelso?'

She saw the earl and Beatrice crossing the hall, and the jealous pain deepened.

'I must see him and speak to him,' she said to herself, 'or I shall die.'

Suddenly she remembered what Beatrice had said about the box of costumes from London, in the 'red room.' She could put one on, and in the crowd no one would think of her or recognize her. Her heart beat fast at the thought; no harm could come of it, for Lady Penrith had urged her to be there. She would go, she would speak to him words of most solemn warning. He should not recognize her, he should never know who she was; but she would say such words to him as would make him pause and think.

She hurried to the 'red room,' a large bedroom in the western wing of the castle. There Lady Penrith's thoughtful kindness had prepared everything requisite for the use of any hapless lady who might be disappointed by the non-arrival of her costume. There was powder for her face and hair, rouge, everything necessary for the toilet. The box of costumes had been unfastened, and some of them were laid, ready for use, on the bed. She took up the first that came to her hand, and then she saw that Lady Penrith had also left two or three black masks; many of the dancers had worn masks. Agatha was relieved when she saw them; there would not be the least fear now; she could speak to him and he would never know her.

Hastily, with burning hands and beating heart, she arrayed herself, despite the anguish, pain and dismay. She turned, like a true woman, to the glass, and there she stood for a few min-

utes like one rooted to the ground. She saw in the mirror one of the most beautiful women in the world—a fair, queenly blonde. Of late years she had in a great measure forgotten her own beauty—the charm of it was gone; she had never thought of it except as a barrier to a good situation; she had dressed plainly, and had not studied either grace or elegance; she had lived so long away from the gay world that she had forgotten she was beautiful, and she stood now looking into the mirror with the utmost wonder and surprise. The dress she had chosen, without looking at it, was a Venetian costume, with rich, hanging sleeves, and square-cut neck. It was made of rich, dark-blue velvet, and covered with seed pearls. It fitted her to perfection, and she looked so beautiful in it that she dare not go down stairs—her white neck and white arms, with their rare perfection of shape and color, must, she knew, attract attention. If she had gone down as she was, she would have been by far the most beautiful woman present; Beatrice by her side would have been as a star before the sun.

She dare not go. She had seen enough of the world to know that men will follow and admire a beautiful woman whether she shuns them or not. Then she bethought herself that she might cover the white neck and arms, fold a black lace shawl in picturesque fashion over them, which she did; and fixing a mask, such as the dancers wore, over her face, she made her way to the ball-room.

Her heart beat, yet she knew she had nothing to fear. If Lady Penrith or Beatrice saw her they would say nothing: they would be only too pleased to find her there.

‘I must see him! I must speak to him, or I shall die!’ she said to herself.

In after days it seemed to her like a dream. She crossed the hall, and went to the alcove where she had seen the earl and Beatrice. It was a quiet spot that no one would be likely to invade. No one gave much attention to the dark figure, and she, with her whole soul in her eyes, watched for the pair. There was Beatrice seated near a pretty fountain, and the handsome earl standing by her side. He had just brought her an ice, and with an amused smile, he stood by her side while she ate it.

Near the alcove were seated two young lovers, and they were

compelled to raise their voices because the music drowned most other sounds. Agatha was compelled to hear what they said.

'Look at that picture by the fountain!' said the boy-lover.

'How beautiful Beatrice Penrith is!'

'The earl is handsome, in his fashion,' said the lady; then they laughed.

'How he loves her!' continued the boy-lover; 'his face brightens when he looks at her.'

'How she loves him!' laughed the lady. 'If ever a girl carried her heart in her eyes, it is Beatrice Penrith.'

Ah, jealous, horrible pain that seemed to tear her heart! What did they know of him? Why should they discuss him? If they wanted to know what real love was, they should have seen him with her. She could not bear it. Of course she knew that he would marry Beatrice—Beatrice was to be his wife; but that was no reason why she should sit there and hear them discussed. She rose from her seat and walked away.

'Who is that?' asked the boy-lover.

'I do not know,' answered the lady. 'She looks very proud and very haughty, but her dress is not much.'

And Agatha thought to herself that it was very possible to look both proud and haughty with a sword piercing an aching heart.

She went over to that part of the hall where the lovers were; some strange, subtle fascination drew her near him. The group round the fountain was a large one now; she could form one of it without attracting any attention.

At last she was near him, so near that if she had held out her arm she must have touched him. She forgot Beatrice, she forgot the whole world—she only remembered him, the dear, familiar presence. In her heart she cried aloud to him to turn once and look at her, to speak a word to her, and let her die.

'How weak, how foolish, how wicked I am!' she said to herself. 'What should I care? He deceived and betrayed me?'

The dear, familiar face, and she was so near it. She remembered how she used to smooth those dark eyebrows with her fingers, and he declared that the very action sent him to sleep; the cluster of dark hair on his brow; the clear brown tint of the handsome face; the half-laughing, half-mocking smile that curled the beautiful mouth—a smile for which she always

scolded him, telling him it meant nothing, it had no character. She thought of this now as she stood near him, but he had no eyes, no thoughts save for Beatrice.

Once more the notes of a beautiful, inspiring waltz were heard, and the group dispersed. Some one came to claim Beatrice, and Agatha saw that the earl was unwilling to let her go. She drew back to some little distance—not that she feared he would recognize her, but that it was better to be on the safe side. He stood alone for a few minutes—he never even saw the dark figure; but Agatha noticed that when he was alone his face changed, the light went out of it, an expression of deep melancholy came over it.

‘He is not happy,’ thought Agatha, as she watched him. ‘That is not the face of a happy man.’

He sighed deeply, as though some great weight were on his mind, and then two or three gentlemen came up to where he was standing.

‘Alone!’ cried one.

‘What a success the ball is!’ said another; ‘but how melancholy you look—more like a rejected than an accepted lover.’

‘I know what is the matter with me,’ said Lord Kelso, ‘I want a cigar.’

‘Well,’ said one of his friends, ‘I would not leave the ball-room with so many pretty faces in it for all the cigars in Europe.’

‘I would,’ said the earl.

How well she remembered. He had always cared so much about his cigar; he had told her once that neither ball, party, opera, nor anything else pleased him when he could not smoke his cigar. She knew that he had a fashion of going out every evening for five or ten minutes, for, according to his theory, the only place in which one could smoke to perfection was in the open air.

Her heart gave one great beat. If he went now, she could follow him—speak to him—warn him—and he would not find out who it was. So she watched him steadily, and at last, when he thought himself unnoticed, he stole out quietly, and she knew that he had gone hoping for ten minutes’ happiness with a good cigar.

She followed him quietly and at a distance.

## CHAPTER LXI.

## A SOLEMN WARNING.

HERE was never a scene more dramatic. The night was warm, the air full of perfume ; there was a great hush over the trees and flowers, the sky was blue and studded with golden stars, the moon shone brightly, and threw strange shadows on the grass. A long, white terrace arose along the whole front of the house, marble steps led to a second terrace, a white marble balustrade went the whole length of it, and that balustrade in summer was covered with passion flowers and roses ; even now, this warm September, superb fuchsias hung their beautiful heads over the white marble, and made the fairest picture ever seen. Leaning over the balustrade, crushing the purple and crimson blossoms, one had a lovely view of the landscape, of the gardens, with their countless variety of blooms, of the broad, beautiful river, and of the deep green woods beyond.

To-night the moon shone over all ; the river was like a broad band of silver, the trees stood out clear and distinct. It was a picture to see the handsome earl with the moon shining on the dark face and picturesque dress ; he looked a very Romeo as he leaned over the crimson fuchsias and watched the rush of the river, the blue rings of smoke rising from his cigar. His dark, handsome face was thoughtful and sad ; who shall say what voices came to him in the silence of the night ?—what cries he heard in the river ?—what reproaches were written for him in the moonlight skies.

An uneasy thought came to him : he half wished he could live his life over again ; then, with a toss of his handsome head he threw all such thoughts away—of what use were they ?

A shadow falls over the grass, a tall, dark figure creeps noiselessly up to him, a woman whose dress of dark looks black in the moonlight, and whose face is hidden with the fanciful mask.

She goes up to him, and the sound of her light footstep is not heard. She stops for one moment to look at the bending figure and the dark, handsome face that looks so sad in the moonlight ; then, going up to him with swift, noiseless tread, she takes suddenly from her dress a white lace handkerchief and throws it round his eyes, catching it in a knot behind. Before he has time to speak or look round, it is done.

'Ah, Beatrice,' he says, 'I know that is you, but you need not blind my eyes ; I can see you even when they are shut.'

'It is not Beatrice,' whispered a low, sad voice. 'It is a stranger.'

He started and raised his hand to remove the handkerchief, but she, quick as lightning, restrained him.

'No,' she said ; 'you were taken fairly captive ; you are bound in honor to stand there—blind—until I have spoken, then I will restore your sight.'

'A masquerade,' he cried, laughingly ; 'remember I am Romeo.'

'You are a caricature of Romeo—he had but one love.'

'This is like a game of forfeits,' he said. 'How many have I !'

'You know best,' said the sad, quiet voice ; 'you have never been constant to any one yet. 'I am not Beatrice, but I know her, and I know you. I know that she is young and beautiful, and worthy of a better fate than to be tied for life to a man who thinks so lightly of all women, and who believes in none.'

'This is getting serious,' said the earl, and his light laughter died away on the night air.

'I am speaking seriously,' she said. 'This is the kind of night on which a man's heart lies open before God. I ask you, is yours a fit life to be one with the life of that pure, innocent girl, who thinks you a hero ?'

'Perhaps not,' he answered.

'Perhaps not !' she repeated. 'You know it is not. Some men are content if they take the life of the body ; you, and such as you, take the life of a soul. How many lost souls owe their ruin to you ?—and how many women owe to you a broken heart and a ruined home ? How shall you sum up the

woe and misery you have caused, just because Heaven created you with a handsome face. If good deeds bring men to Heaven, where will bad deeds lead you ?'

'This is a strange entertainment for a fancy ball,' he cried, 'Who are you who seem to know so much of me ?'

'That does not matter. I have been watching that young girl's face to-night until my heart grows hot with indignation, knowing what I know of you.'

'Who are you ?' he repeated. 'Of course, as you have bandaged my eyes, and you are a lady, I must not attempt to see. Are you some one who had ever been kind enough to care just a little about me ?'

'I am one who knows and admires Beatrice Penrith, and who knows you, and I think that to make her innocent life one with yours, stained with sin, is a crime—a foul and shameful deed. I warn you. You do not love her, you know you do not—'

'That is going too far, my dear incognita, he said, laughingly.

'No, it is not ; it is perfectly true. For a bad man, you have wonderfully good taste ; you like simple and innocent girls—they are so easily deceived.'

'You know me well enough,' he said ; 'that is certain.'

'I would have you pause and think,' she said. 'This is a night on which a man may bare his heart before Heaven and own his sins. And ask yourself if you know no reason why you should fear to mar this young and innocent life. How many oaths and vows have you made to others ? How many ruined lives lie between you and her ?'

'I am no worse than other men,' he said, sullenly.

'Shame on the other men,' she said. 'I should be sorry to think they were like you.'

'What do you know of me that is so bad ?' he asked, after a time.

'Ah, if I could tell you the pictures that in my mind I see ! Do you think a woman made homeless and friendless through you has never cursed you with her dying breath ! Do you think that for love of you and hate of you, mixed, no woman has ever appealed to Heaven against you, and cried out for its judgment upon you ?'

'Women do these things for trifles,' he sneered.

'Men often give to crimes the name of trifles,' she replied. 'But there comes a reckoning day, Lord Kelso; one will come for you. I would rather be a murderer, my hands reeking hot with human blood, than you with those lost souls on your hands. They will cry to Heaven for vengeance against you; when you want mercy for yourself, they will ask what mercy you showed them; when you stand at the bar of judgment, they will cry out against you. Is yours a soul to mate with the white soul of an innocent girl?'

He shrank back, trembling.

'Who, in the name of Heaven, are you,' he asked, 'that you dare say such things to me?'

'Take warning,' she said. 'You will never know who I am; it does not matter. I could sooner see a white dove in the talons of an eagle, than a girl like Beatrice Penrith married to a man like you.'

'I shall do my best to make her happy,' he said.

'Happy!' she repeated with scorn. 'How can you be either happy or make any one else happy. You cannot have a good conscience.'

'You are a very plain-spoken person, whoever you may be,' said the earl; 'perhaps you mean well. I have not been quite all that I should be—I acknowledge it; and, strange to say, I was thinking to-night, as I stood watching the moon on the river, that if I had my life to live over again—I would do different—I would indeed.'

His voice startled her; her heart seemed to leave her and cling to him. Great Heaven, how she loved him! She knew that he was wicked, yet she loved him and could not help herself.

'Do tell me one thing,' he said. 'Is it from interest in me, or in Beatrice, that you have sought me to tell me this?'

'In Beatrice,' she replied, faintly.

'Then be happy about Beatrice,' he said. 'I will respect her youth and innocence; I will make her happy. She loves me, and she shall never hear one word of the past, which I own is not what it ought to have been. Does that promise content you?'

She made no answer, but after a few minutes she whispered to him:



'As you stand in the presence of Heaven, Lord Kelso, is there no other reason why you should not marry Beatrice?'

'I know of none,' he replied, briefly.

'Is there no one living who has a claim upon you?'

'No—no one living,' he replied. 'There was one, but she is dead.'

'Dead?' she repeated.

'Yes, dead. It is evident to me that you have heard some of the many stories told of my past life. Some of them are true, and some are false. There is one who, if she had been living, would have had a claim on me; but she is dead.'

'He thinks I am dead,' said Agatha to herself. 'I will never undeceive him.'

'Beware!' she said, gently; 'the time comes when the life of every man ends. You have time to repent and atone—do not neglect it.'

'I wish I knew who you are,' he said. 'Of course, if you forbid me, I cannot remove this handkerchief, but I should like to do so—may I?'

There was no answer.

'May I?' repeated Lord Kelso.

Again no answer.

With a low baffled cry, he tore it from his face, and—behold! she was gone—gone, and he had not even seen the colour of her dress or caught one glimpse of her face—gone, and he never heard her footsteps.

For a few minutes he was scared and half frightened; it was surely no earthly visitant,' he thought. Who could she be?—where was she gone?—she who knew so much about him; and what, he wondered, *did* she know? Surely it was not the old story about Lady Di——! That was, of course, bad, but other men had done the same thing. She could not know anything about Agatha—that was the most cruel blow, the worst story, but no one knew anything of it.

Suddenly he remembered the handkerchief, and laughed to himself with exultation.

'She has forgotten that,' he said to himself. 'Now I shall find her out.'

He flung away his cigar with impatience, and looked at his prize. There was no mark of any kind upon it—it was a plain

square of finest cambric, with a deep border of fine lace. If he had but known it, it was one of many dozens that he had purchased for Agatha himself.

'I may trace her by it,' he said, as he placed it in the pocket of his doublet; 'and if I find her——'

He did not finish the words.

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 CHAPTER LXII.

## THE WHISPERING VOICE.

**P**UZZLED and bewildered, the earl made his way back to the ball-room; the cigar and the moonlight had lost their attractions for him. Who could this be—this mysterious lady, who seemed to know so much about him, who could speak to him of his past life with such clearness, who evidently knew all that had befallen him—his history, his follies? He would go back to the ball-room, and see if by the conscious look of any lady there present he could make out which or who she was.

It had scared and startled him more than he cared to own. He had never thought of himself as a *wicked* man. He knew that he had been guilty of great follies, that they were in themselves almost crimes; but then he had not meant them as such, nor had he in his own mind ever given them that name; but to find that some one else gave to his career a term that characterized it as criminal, to find that he was looked upon as a wicked man, and that there were people who rose in rebellion against the notion that he should link his life with the pure and spotless one of that young girl, struck him as nothing had ever done before. For the first time in his life he began to think.

'After all,' he said to himself. 'I have done no worse than other men. I am sure that Crawford, in the Guards, and Templeton, and half a dozen others whom I could name, have

been and are worse than I ; yet no one calls them wicked men—the world speak of them as jolly fellows, who have sown their wild oats.'

And he began to wonder if there were two ways of thinking, two kinds of judgment—one in the light of this world, and one in the light of the next. If it were so, if he had to go through that—the keen, rigorous scrutiny of a judge—he did not know what would become of him.

'These are not very pleasant thoughts for a fancy ball,' he said to himself, trying to fling dull care away.

But when the voice of conscience is first roused, it is not so easily silenced. Lord Kelso had lived a life of pleasure ; he had never troubled himself in the least about religion, or appearances—he had never stopped to count the cost of a pleasure either to himself or others ; and now he was told in plain language, that these pleasures were so many ropes dragging him downward. The rich, clear music rose and fell, but far above it, sounded that whispering voice, telling him that at the great bar of judgment he must meet those whom he had injured.

Of course he flattered himself it was all nonsense ; but, oh, Heaven ! if it were true—if he had to meet those to whom he had been pitiless, whom he had dragged down from happy homes, fair lives, into shameless ruin ! What if Lady D——, the beautiful woman who had given up husband, children, and everything life holds dear—what if she confronted him, and asked for justice ! Fair young faces appeared to him. Great Heaven ! if he could live over again, this should never be. And one face, fairer than all others, sweet and tender, framed in golden hair that was like a halo round it, came to him from the depths of silent water—Agatha, whom he had loved best, deceived most, and most cruelly betrayed. Ah, well, he knew this—so sure was he of her love—that she would never reproach him ; others might, never Agatha.

'Why did I not marry her ?' he asked himself. 'By this time she would have made a good man of me.'

Then he came to the conclusion that he must shake off these thoughts. Of what avail to be a great earl, to have greater wealth than he knew how to spend, to be handsome, and honored, and flattered, if conscience were allowed to sting, re-

proach and torture him as it did an ordinary man? It was strange, but no thought of Beatrice came to him in that hour and he, the brave earl who never faltered, stood for a few minutes before the entrance to the ball-room with a beating heart, actually hesitating whether he should go in or not, because some one in the room knew all about him, and could give the whole story of his career.

'It must be some woman whom I have flirted with, or, what is more probable, who has flirted with me.'

He went in. It seemed like a dream: everything the same—the dancers, the music, the flowers. There was the same laughing, jesting, and flirting, but nowhere did he see any one looking at him with a conscious face.

How bright, and fair and careless the faces of the women! Some looked at him with bright, some with careless smiles, some with admiration, and with a feeling that was even warmer; but nowhere did he see the face of a woman likely to have spoken to him of the Great Day of Judgment. Was this a dream, and was that half-hour under the cold light of the moon, with the great boughs of fuchsia hanging round him, and that low voice in his ear—was that a dream? Both could not be real; it was like going from this world to another. Ah, well, there was the pale, beautiful 'Snowdrop,' to whom he was engaged for the 'Lancers,' evidently looking out for him—a welcome distraction. Now he should, perhaps, forget those bitter words.

He hastened to her. She looked up in his face and shrank back, half-frightened.

'Are you ill, Lord Kelso?' she asked. 'You look as though you had seen a ghost.'

'I believe I have seen one,' he replied. And when the dance ended he asked the pale, pretty Snow-drop to go with him in search of ice and champagne, then he carefully introduced the white lace handkerchief. 'Is this yours?' he asked. 'I found it.'

'No,' she replied 'it is not mine.' She took it from his hand and examined it with some little care and attention. 'What beautiful lace,' she said.

'Is it—is it costly, do you think?' he said, eagerly.

'It is the most beautiful that could be used for the purpose,' she said.

'It must belong to a lady then,' he said, and she thought to herself, what a peculiar thing to say. It satisfied him on one point—it was no vulgar, half-bred woman who had had the quick tact and wit to fling the pretty handkerchief round his head—it was a lady.

To more than one of his partners did the earl show the piece of lace, but no one owned it; he took it at last to Beatrice.

'I have had the good fortune to find this,' he said. 'Have you any idea to whom it belongs?'

'No. It is very fine lace,' she replied: 'but people are always losing things in ball-rooms. I have heard mamma say the floor of a ball-room is like a battle-field when the fight is over. You will never find an owner for that.'

And he found that her words were perfectly true, he never did.

When he awoke next morning he was more puzzled than ever; he had read all the names on Lady Penrith's visiting list, but he did not recognize any of them as friends of his; he had seen no one among the guests whom he ought to know; he was puzzled. The solemn words were with him still, ringing in his ear, beating in his brain, over and over again until they dazed him; he could not quite recover himself. During the next day he spoke to Lady Penrith. He asked about all the ladies in the neighborhood, the newly married and single ones; he asked especially about those stopping in the house, but he could hear nothing. He little dreamed who it was, or who lived under the roof with him.

He did not even know there was a governess at Penrith Castle. Lady Penrith, when the house was full of visitors did not see much of the two children; she had a notion they were better in the school-room. Lord Kelso had met them once or twice when they were out with the nurse, had played with them, and bought them handsome presents; but he had not even heard of a governess, and with his whole heart he believed Agatha to be dead. She never even entered his mind.

Lord Kelso was not the only one in the castle who spent a sleepless night—it seemed to Agatha as though she should never sleep again; her heart beat, her eyes burned, her whole soul was sick with pain.

It was like an evil dream—how, unconsciously, during these bright September days, she had been living under the same roof with him. How little she had dreamed that the earl of whom Beatrice talked so enthusiastically was the man whom she believed to have been her husband, and had loved with her whole heart.

And Beatrice—what was to become of her? How would it end? What a terrible tragedy it was! She wondered if it were fate or Providence that had brought her there. Of all the world it seemed so strange that she should have gone to the house where he came wooing. She half believed that it was the will of Heaven she should interfere. She tossed restlessly to and fro, there was no sleep for her on the white pillow. She dreaded to see Beatrice again—the hapless, innocent girl, for whom so much suffering was in store; she dreaded her questions, dreaded even hearing her say how happy she was, or speaking of the earl in any way. Knowing what she knew, she felt it would have been far better for Beatrice to have died than have met with this fate. But on the evening following the ball Beatrice found half an hour's leisure in which to see her. She was slightly tired, but too nappy to feel much fatigue.

'Miss Brooke,' she cried, 'I am longing to know if you went to the ball after all.'

'Yes,' replied Agatha, 'I went to the gallery, and was there for some time.'

'Then,' said Beatrice, with a light sunshine on her face, 'then you saw my earl?'

She was silent for a few minutes before she could answer her.

Then she said, quietly.

'Yes, I saw him.'

'Tell me what you think of him,' she cried. 'I longed for you to see him; now you will understand better when I talk to you. What did you think of him?'

'He was, without exception, the handsomest man in the room,' said Agatha, slowly, 'the handsomest; and I liked his costume best—it was most picturesque.'

'I knew you would think so. I am so glad,' cried Beatrice. 'You thought him handsome, did you not notice how noble he

is? His face and his fearless eyes are noble. Do you not think so? I cannot think how pleased I am that you have seen him.'

'I was very happy last night, Miss Brooke,' she continued. 'I do not think I shall ever be quite so happy again—not quite; and Lord Kelso was very kind to me. It was a splendid ball. I have never seen a better; everything went off so well. Do you know, Miss Brooke, that Lord Kelso found a beautiful handkerchief with such fine lace around it?'

Agatha turned away suddenly lest Beatrice should see the sudden pallor of her face. She had forgotten the handkerchief, she had been so intent on making her escape before he saw her. Then she remembered there was no mark upon it by which he could possibly trace her.

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## CHAPTER LXIII.

### LIKE A DAGGER IN HER HEART.

**T**HE one thing which had been a mystery to her—how Sir Vane had become Lord Kelso—was explained by Lady Penrith. Her ladyship had gone into the school-room. She wanted a half-holiday for the children, and always showed Agatha this mark of respect—she went and asked for it herself. As the little ones were at play, she remained talking to Miss Brooke, for whom she had a very sincere liking. Lord Kelso's name was mentioned, and Lady Penrith spoke of him more at length than she had ever done before. She liked him very much; she thought he had wonderful talents, and he was so fond of Beatrice, that was the chief thing; her beautiful, beloved child would be so unutterably happy. Then she went on to tell Agatha how he had not been Earl of Kelso long, and that but for him that ancient title would have been extinct.

'He was Sir Vane Carlyon when I first knew him,' said Lady Penrith, 'and Beatrice was in the school-room; but the

Earl of Kelso died, and then, after long research, it was found that Sir Vane was really his nearest kin and lawful heir. The old earl had a large family of his own once—sons and daughters—but they are all dead now; not one remained to him.

She paused, but Agatha made no remark; she was quite unable to speak. Lady Penrith continued:

'I think he was much happier as Sir Vane. Since he has borne the title of Lord Kelso he has been more melancholy. I have heard many people say the same thing. Indeed, added her ladyship, smiling, 'the first thing that drew Beatrice's attention to him was the quiet sadness of his face; he looks better now.'

Still no answer. Agatha's sweet face was bent over her work. Lady Penrith continued:

'Sir Vane has a fine place at Garswood—I was there once, some years ago—not to visit him, but a party of us went to look at the place, and very magnificent it is. I never thought then that my little daughter would grow up to be its mistress.'

'How long has he been Lord Kelso,' asked Agatha.

'Not quite two years,' was the answer; 'but those two years have changed him considerably.'

For a few days Agatha stood by passively, as it were, to see if any notice would be taken of her warning; but everything went on just the same, with this exception, that Lord Kelso showed more curiosity about the neighbors than he had ever done. It was easy for Agatha to avoid seeing him, the house was so full of visitors, and gaieties of some kind or other were always on foot.

The preparations for the marriage went on, but Agatha was wretched. She could not see her way clear at all; she could not tell whether she ought to prevent it or to let it go on; whether she should interfere or remain passive. She was so puzzled, so unhappy, so uncertain of her duty, that she grew pale and thin. She could not see what was best to be done.

It was not surely *right* for Vane to marry her—that could not be. He had sworn, over and over again, that he would have no other wife, love no other woman, except Agatha. Was it right that he should break all those oaths? Was he not bound to her by every tie most sacred, before God and man? Yet, if she told what she knew, if she prevented this marriage,



the chances were that he would marry some one else who would, perhaps, laugh at her warning, and then Beatrice would be made miserable in vain.

What would be best? Should she speak to Lord and Lady Penrith?—tell them something of what she knew, and leave it to them whether they gave their daughter to him or not? She could not decide.

Or, should she be silent? He had told her that he should amend—that he would lead a better life—that he would be kind to Beatrice and make her happy. If that were likely to be the case, then her interference would certainly do more harm than good. There was just one more possibility, she might warn them, and they might refuse to believe her—might suspect and blame her. It was not that she cared so much for herself, but if this happened, what avail would it all be? Less than nothing; and, again, Beatrice would be made miserable in vain—all quite in vain. Never was any one so puzzled. She wanted to do what was the right thing, without caring for her own share of praise or blame.

She heard nothing but what was good of Lord Kelso; every one praised him. Lady Penrith declared that if he were her own son she could not love him better; Lord Penrith was never happier than when with him; the children could not love him enough, and Beatrice was almost too happy to live.

'I am like the serpent in the Garden of Eden,' she said to herself; and even Beatrice wondered at the change which had come over that beautiful, loving-hearted woman who had always been so kind to her.

When she went, with her heart full of love and happiness, to talk to her about the earl, Miss Brooke looked tired, languid, and unhappy; she had no more cheerful smiles or bright words, no more warm sympathy. Uncertainty as to the right and wrong of what she had to do was not the only cause of her suffering; she loved him still, this handsome earl who had done his best to ruin her. She could not take back from him, because he was unworthy of it, the love she had given to him. She was a tender-hearted, loving woman, who had suffered a great wrong, but this wrong did not make her hate the evil-doer when she had recovered from the first shock of knowing that he was there under the same roof with her.

It was a fever—a torture of jealousy—that seized her, when Beatrice came, with flying feet and flushed, happy face, to tell her that she was going out driving, riding or walking with the earl. She could not always control herself, and give the sweet, warm sympathy that the girl sought. Her heart would ache; her face grow pale; her eyes darken with shadows of pain. She loved Lord Kelso, and he had been more than the whole world to her, and she could not endure the thought that the same love and gentle words he had given to her now belonged to another.

There were times when, after she had seen Lord Kelso ride away from the church gates—she so happy, fair, and smiling; he so stately, kind, and handsome—she would go into her room, shut the door, and fling herself with her face on the floor, there to sob out her woe and grief with bitter sighs and bitter tears.

‘Shame to me,’ she cried, ‘that I love him yet! I love him yet! Oh, my one love—my dear love! Would to Heaven that I might forget you, or might die!’

It was wonderful to her how she forgot her injuries—forgot the great wrongs done to her, and thought only of him.

Beatrice came to her one day, knowing that Agatha was very clever with her pencil, to ask her to draw a design.

‘I want it to embrace Lord Kelso’s motto and crest: not the crest he uses now, with the Kelso arms, but those he bore when he was Sir Vane Carlyon. I like them best.’

‘I will do my best to please you, Beatrice.’

And the young girl leaned on Agatha’s shoulder, as the white, slender fingers deftly used the pencil.

‘What is the crest?’ asked Agatha; and her voice sounded cold and chill.

‘A crown, with an olive branch,’ replied Beatrice.

It was with difficulty Agatha kept back her tears. How well she remembered it! How many hundreds of times she had seen it and kissed it.

‘What is the motto?’ she asked, gently.

‘“Vincit Veritas,”’ replied Beatrice, smiling over the words as though she loved them, ‘and they suit him, Miss Brooke. He seems to me always the very embodiment of truth; it shines in his eyes and in his face—do you not think so?’

The question was like a dagger in her heart. She evaded it, making some answer that contented Beatrice without betraying herself.

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## CHAPTER LXIV.

AS SHE LOOKED THEN SHE NEVER LOOKED AGAIN.

**S**O September came and went, and yet she had come to no decision. Lord Kelso was going away then—going to town on business connected with the marriage, and Beatrice confided to Agatha her sorrow at losing him. ‘I have learned to love him so well,’ she said. ‘At first when I thought how soon we were to be married, I was not sorry, you know; but it seemed to me soon—that I had hardly had time to enjoy my girlhood, and it was almost over. But now I would not change it for the world—I would not have it one day later. I am miserable even that he is going to leave me for so short a time.’

And she listening, knowing all, could not utter one word. Lord Kelso went, leaving behind him nothing but praise and good words, while Agatha lived through what seemed to her a torture of suspense; she could come to no decision—the way was dark before her.

Lord Kelso was to return at the end of October for a few weeks, and then they were not to meet again until the wedding-day; it was settled for the twenty-second of December.

The bright hours passed, and with each one bringing her nearer to the one she loved, Beatrice became happier every day. She was in the highest spirits; her beautiful face was bright with smiles; to look at her was to feel young, and happy, and gladsome. While every day the gentle heart of Agatha Brooke grew more heavy, more uncertain, more despairing—her thoughts and ideas did not seem to grow clearer.

Every day she saw greater preparations made for that marriage which seemed to her so cruel, and Beatrice loving her

better every day, trusted her more and more. She talked to Agatha of her future, of that future which seemed so bright to her; of what she would do when she lived at Garswood, until there were times when the brave, patient spirit broke down, and Agatha turned away with a moan on her lips.

Nearer and nearer—every day now brought boxes and chests to the castle; every day brought some portion or other of the elaborate trousseau which might have been prepared for a princess.

Nothing else was spoken about; it was always Lord Kelso and the wedding—the wedding and the trousseau—until even Lady Penrith laughed and said the subject must be changed.

What was she to do? She had no one to help or advise her; she had no certain rules to guide her; she could not tell, as she generally did, at the first glance what was right and what was wrong.

If any one had ever prophesied to Agatha that the time would come when she would hesitate as she was doing now, not knowing right from wrong, she would never have believed them. Now she would have given much for a ray of light to guide her on a dark road.

The chill, serene month of October brought the earl back again to Penrith Castle. It was like a real coming home, for he had forgotten no one. Lady Penrith raised her hands and eyes in amazement at the number and splendor of the presents he brought with him. The children were in ecstasy—they wished that such a lover came every day; and Beatrice was happier in a quiet fashion. She said less, but Agatha saw that she loved him more. Her loving heart could not rest until she had caught one glimpse of him. She went to one of the unused rooms of the eastern wing, that she might watch him from thence as he mounted his horse. He looked well and strong, but there was no happiness in the dark, handsome face.

She could have stretched out her hands to him with a loving cry. Ah, if she dare! If that beautiful head were turned to her but for one moment, and the dark eyes flashed recognition into hers!

'I shall drive myself mad,' she said, as she turned resolutely away.

She saw little of Beatrice for the next few days, only at times she caught sight of a glad young face, beautiful in its

love and hope. Then, suddenly as a thunder-storm breaks on a summer day, a shock came to her, an event happened, perhaps the most terrible and the most unlikely.

The whole party—it was a mild, warm day in October, one of those which come at rare intervals—and the whole party of guests, with Lord and Lady Penrith, had driven over to one of the neighboring mansions, where they were expected to take luncheon.

On such occasions, when the beautiful, stately old mansion was empty, it was Agatha's delight to roam over it, to visit the picture-gallery and the drawing-rooms, so full of beauty and luxury. Many little things that she saw this morning touched her heart deeply. Some music belonging to Beatrice lay upon the piano in the drawing-room; she saw her name written upon it in Vane's handwriting. She bent down and kissed it, her eyes filled with hot tears. Just then the sound of footsteps on the terrace attracted her attention; surely they had not returned yet. She went quickly to the window. She knew that the earl and Beatrice had ridden together. If any unforeseen incident had brought them back again—she must go and see.

But a strange figure was there. A carriage, evidently hired from the nearest railway station or hotel, stood before the grand entrance, and a lady had just descended from it, and was walking up to the hall door—a tall stately figure, clad in a black, simple dress, and wearing a black veil, quite a stranger to Penrith, for by mistake she had turned to the terrace on the left—a stranger, yet there was something almost terribly familiar in her style and carriage.

The lady went up to the great hall-door, and then Agatha heard a long, loud peal. In some vague way it struck horror into her—it filled her with dread, and then she reproached herself for being weak and foolish; yet some impulse led her to the great entrance-hall, where she overheard a footman talking to the stranger.

A sudden horror, a dreadful trembling seized her—the tones of that voice were quite familiar. A half sharp, half-imperious voice, with a piquant French accent. Her heart almost stood still; a chill, terrible as the cold of death came over her. What could it mean? Surely as she was living, surely as the bright

sun shone in a blue sky, that was the voice of Valerie d'Envers. She stood for a few moments in horrible distress and suspense; then she heard the same voice, but this time in far more imperious accents say:

'I have travelled some distance, at great inconvenience to myself, to see Lord and Lady Penrith on very important business, and I shall not go away until I have seen them. If they are not at home, I will wait here until they return.'

It was Valerie—brilliant, beautiful Valerie. What had brought her here? Valerie, who had slain her with cruel words; Valerie, who had robbed her of her happiness, her life, and her love; Valerie, whose cruel, perfect face had bent over her in the agony of death. Looking neither to the right nor to the left—never deigning to let her eyes fall on the figure standing so silent, Valerie swept through the great entrance hall, and Agatha anxiously following her with her eyes.

'Show me into a room where there is a fire,' she said. 'If I have to wait some hours, I shall feel the cold.'

Agatha saw a peculiar smile on the servant's face, as he opened the door of one of the anterooms, where a good fire was blazing. She swept in, and the man closed the door. Agatha, with a white, wild look on her face, went up to him.

'Who is that lady, John?' she asked.

'I do not know, miss; she would not give any name or any card. She wants to see my lord and my lady—and see them she will. I should think she is a French lady, by her accent and manner.'

John had no more to say, and Agatha knew that it would not be safe to indulge in any curiosity. It was Valerie, there could be no denying that—no mistake; and judging from her manner, Valerie in her most haughty and determined mood.

At last Agatha felt quite sure that it was to seek her that the French woman was there. She must have heard that she had made her way into the world of pure and good women, from which she declared her shut out. She had come to betray her; to tell the story of her fatal mistake; to ruin her by driving her from this haven of rest, where she had found peace. It must be that—there was nothing else to bring her here. Yet, why should she persecute her? Why, after this long interval of time seek to do her harm? Valerie could know

nothing of the Penriths. It could be from no interest in them that she was anxious to betray her. Another thing was how could it be possible that she should have traced her there? Then another, and even more terrible idea came to her—one that made her tremble. It was, perhaps, not for her that Valerie had come, but for Lord Kelso.

She knew nothing of what had passed between Sir Vane and Valerie, but she was wiser now than when she lived in the beautiful castle by the lake. She had thought it all over since and had to come to the conclusion that the part Valerie played had been suggested by jealousy. Could it be possible that she had come to harm him? And the woman whom he had wronged and betrayed felt her heart warm and her courage rise. Valerie should not injure him—no one should, no one should hurt a hair of his head; she would stand before him, if need should be, and receive the sword-thrust meant for him. He had betrayed her, wronged her, inflicted the deadliest injury upon her, but no one should ever hurt him. She would give her life for him cheerfully, as she had given her heart and love. And the woman who should have hated him, found herself weeping hot tears lest harm should come to him—never while she could avert it.

Then, again, she could not see what harm could be done. It did not matter to Valerie whether he married or not, or would be married. One thing was certain, he could never have had any thought of marrying her, or he would have done so. She was miserably anxious.

At one time she thought of going to Valerie, and asking her what she was there for. Then the fear came to her that she might, perhaps, be doing more harm than good. She did not know in what manner her rash interference would end.

She stood at the window when the party returned, and the first two who came up the long avenue were Beatrice and the earl, riding side by side—she smiling, blushing, happy, as she would never be in this world again. The sunshine fell upon her face, on her figure; they seemed to have found a home in the radiant eyes raised to her lover's face; and as she looked then, in the light of the sun, in the light of her love, she never looked again.

They rode up to the front, the grand entrance, and, with some little confusion of laughing and talking, they entered the

house. She knew afterward all that passed, when time had healed the bitter wounds. At first no word was said of the strange lady; then the footman came to tell Lady Penrith that a visitor was waiting for her.

'A French lady,' said Lady Penrith. 'I have no idea who it can be.'

She went at once to the ante-room, where Valerie, tall and stately, awaited her. She rose in silence when the mistress of the castle entered, and made her most stately bow.

'You wish to see me,' said Lady Penrith, quietly, wondering who this brilliant, beautiful Frenchwoman could be.

'Yes. I have come some distance to see you, Lady Penrith; I wish also to see Lord Penrith, and—and a gentleman who is staying here.'

'I do not quite understand,' said Lady Penrith, haughtily.

'You will understand afterward, madam. I cannot explain. I must see Lord Penrith. Will you kindly allow me to ask you one question? Have you a gentleman visiting you called Lord Kelso?'

'I do not understand the question,' replied Lady Penrith. 'I do not feel inclined to answer it.'

'I know that I am doing something quite unconventional, Lady Penrith, but I feel quite sure, when you know the motive, you will say that I am more than justified. I have a carriage waiting, and my time is limited. May I ask if I can see Lord Penrith?'

'I do not know what to say. This a very unusual proceeding. Would you tell me to whom I have the pleasure of speaking?'

'You will not know my name when you hear it, Lady Penrith; but I will tell it to you with pleasure. I am Valerie d'Envers, and Lady Penrith, in her turn, bowed.

She knew the name was one of the best in France. That slightly changed the aspect of affairs. A noble lady would not be there on a trifling errand.

'I wish,' continued Valerie, 'to make a communication to you and to Lord Penrith: but it must be made in the presence of Lord Kelso.'

Then Lady Penrith began to fear, began to wonder what



was coming ; her face grew pale, and she rang the bell with a trembling hand.

'I wish to see Lord Penrith at once,' she said. 'Ask him not to delay.'

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## CHAPTER LXV.

### A FOLLY OR A CRIME

**I**T was not easy to find Lord Penrith ; he had gone to speak to the head gardener, who was waiting for him, and the two had walked together to some distant spot of the garden. While the footman was looking for him the two ladies sat in perfect silence. At first Lady Penrith had felt no alarm ; true, the proceeding was rather unusual, but the lady herself did not look commonplace.

Yet as the minutes passed, and those dark eyes, with their sombre depths of passion and power, watched her with that silent, intense gaze, Lady Penrith began to feel sick at heart. What could it be ?

Nothing, surely, which could hurt her husband or hurt Beatrice—beautiful, happy Beatrice—surely nothing that could hurt her ! Yet the thought fastened like a serpent on her heart, her face grew pale and still ; the dark eyes of the other woman never wavered, never took their glance from her. It was a relief to her when she heard her husband's footsteps.

'Here is Lord Penrith,' she said ; but no change came over the solemn gloom of the beautiful foreign face. The very sight of him, when he opened the door, gave to Lady Penrith a sense of protection ; nothing could go very far wrong when her husband was near. He looked at Valerie in wonder, quick enough to see the sombre beauty of her face, and to recognize from its expression that she was there on no peaceful errand.

He glanced at his wife.

'You want me, Philippa ?' he said ; and then the strange lady rose from her seat and stood before him, tall, erect and stately.

'No, it is I who wish to see you, Lord Penrith,' she said. 'I have come from some distance, and at some inconvenience, for the purpose of seeing you and Lady Penrith. Would you kindly see that the door is closed, and that we have no interruption.'

For an answer Lord Penrith turned round and locked the door.

'We are quite secure now,' he said; 'no one will come near us.'

'I am a stranger to you, Lord Penrith,' said the stately lady; 'let me introduce myself to you. I am Valerie d'Envers; the name you will recognize as one well known in France.'

He bowed low, feeling, as his wife had done, that there was something unusual and extraordinary to bring this lady, in this fashion, to them.

'You admit the fact,' she asked. 'Do you doubt my identity? If so, I can prove it to you in many ways.'

'I do not dispute it,' said the earl.

'I should like briefly to say a few more words about myself,' she continued, 'so that you can rest assured of my respectability and responsibility. Unlike most French unmarried ladies, I am perfectly independent. My father left me a good fortune, and I have been accustomed to spend one-half of my time among my friends in Paris; the other half has been spent with my aunt, Madame la Baronne d'Envers, at the Chateau of Bellefleurs, in Switzerland, and it is in consequence of what I saw there that I am here now.'

'I must explain that my aunt lost the greater part of her fortune, and that in order to make up her income, she, during the spring and summer, lets the greater part of the chateau to the rich English who go abroad. You will understand soon why I tell you this. In what I have to say, do not for one moment imagine that I am speaking untruthfully. If I did you could find it out and punish me, but every word I have to say to you is as true as it is that the sun shines in heaven; therefore, as I tell you my story, do not seek comfort in these words—"it cannot be true." It is *true*. I should not have come all this distance to tell lies.' She looked suddenly up into Lord Penrith's face. 'You have staying here with you now the Earl of Kelso, who was Sir Vane Carlyon some years ago,

but who succeeded very unexpectedly, and through some terribly sudden death, to the Kelso title and estates.'

Lord Penrith bowed. This was a true statement, and there was nothing to be answered.

'I have read,' she continued, 'in papers which should be well informed, that Lord Kelso is about to marry your eldest daughter, Beatrice Penrith.'

'Oh, Heaven! Beatrice,' cried Lady Penrith. It seemed as though her fears and doubts were to be realized; she stretched out her hands as though she would ward off a blow. 'Beatrice,' she repeated, and Lord Penrith went up to her; he knew how she loved this beautiful child; he threw his strong arm round her.

'Hush, Philippa,' he said, gently; 'wait and hear—there are always two sides to every question. Listen; perhaps we can reply.'

'I am sorry for you,' said Valerie to Lady Penrith. 'If I could do my duty without stabbing you to the heart I would, but I cannot. You have accepted Lord Kelso as a suitor for your daughter, therefore you consider him an honorable man.'

'I believe so,' said Lord Penrith, stiffly. He did not like the lady's manner, or the triumph that he saw shining in her dark eyes. If wrong had been done to Beatrice, great Heaven! how he would avenge it.

'You would not take a servant into your household without strict inquiries as to character, honesty, and integrity, would you, Lord Penrith?'

'Certainly not,' he replied; 'although I do not see what that has to do with the question.'

'Only this,' she replied, her lips curling—'only this: that if you had made as many inquiries about your daughter's lover as you would have made over a housemaid or a groom, you would never have consented to his becoming your daughter's husband.'

'Oh, Beatrice! my beautiful Beatrice, bright Beatrice!' wailed Lady Penrith.

And then her husband spoke sharply.

'We have heard nothing that affects Beatrice yet,' he said.

'Had you made inquiries about him,' persisted Valerie, 'you would have found out that he was not fit to marry a young,

innocent child like your daughter ; that although he bears the name of a great man, although people say there is no real harm in him, and that he is his own worst enemy, there are deeper, darker crimes to be laid to his charge—crimes that have blackened his soul, until, I repeat, the white, pure soul of your daughter would shudder at contact with it.'

'Assertion is not proof,' said Lord Penrith, coldly.

'I can give you proof,' she said. 'All the world—that is, all the fashionable world of London—knows and will remember the terrible scandal about Lady G—. She was young and beautiful ; her husband was many years older than herself ; she had three little daughters—baby girls. Sir Vane was a young man then, handsome enough to win the heart of any woman—he won hers ; he took the poor hapless lady from her husband, her children, and her home. She gave up all the world for him. He tired of her in a few months, the love that was to have been immortal died, as wicked love always does, as she has been lost ever since. Do you call that a folly or a crime, Lord Penrith ?'

'A crime,' he answered, in a loud, clear voice ; but Lady Penrith laid her hand on her husband's shoulder, and cried out again for Beatrice, her beloved child.

'You are right,' said Valeria ; 'it was a crime. No honorable man could give his daughter to a man whose hands were red with the heart's blood of another woman. There are people in the world,' she continued, 'who profess to think highly of such things, and will tell you that a young man must sow his wild oats. You are not one of those, Lord Penrith ?'

'I am not,' he replied, proudly.

'I thought not. I pass over many such stories I have heard, and I will relate the one I know myself to be true, and in which I must, unfortunately, take a part.'

Lord Penrith laid his hand caressingly on the head of his wife. It was some comfort that whatever they had to bear, they could bear it better together.

'I have told you,' continued Valeria, 'that I lived with my aunt, Madame d'Envers, in the Chateau Bellefleurs, and that it was her habit during the spring and summer to let part of the castle and grounds. I think it is about five years since a young Englishman wrote to her, signing himself "Heriot," and

saying that he would like to take the chateau, not for a few months, but for a year or two. There was only himself, his wife, and their servants. The terms he offered were so liberal, that my aunt saw at once she had to do with the rich English who do not count money. They agreed, and the Englishman brought his wife, and settled down comfortably at the chateau.

'They must have been enormously rich, as my aunt said, for they spared no luxury; they had everything in the wide world they wished, carriages, horses; they went where they would, and did as they would. When I went, as usual, to spend some months at the chateau, I found my aunt enchanted with her lodgers, above all, with the fair, beautiful girl they call Mrs. Heriot.

'It was only natural that I should be very much with them; we were all young, and Mr. Heriot, one of the most charming and fascinating men—no one could resist him. I did not think at first there was anything strange in the matter; it seemed to me quite natural that a young husband, devoted as Mr. Heriot was to his wife, would naturally prefer the beautiful solitude of Bellefleurs to crowded places, where he would have less time to spend with her. There were times when I envied her, and thought how strange it was that she should have everything, and I—nothing. She was unlike anyone else; she was fair as an angel, and, what was more, she had the fair, white soul of an angel. I must bear this testimony to her—that she was, without exception, the best, the purest, the most perfect woman I have ever known. She had the most spiritual soul. When I have looked at her I have often thought that her heart lived in Heaven. She was so kind, so charitable, so good to the poor, so tender and loving to every one. If I tried I could not describe her; I bow to her in involuntary homage now, as I speak of her.

'At first I had no suspicion, but after a time we talked, as all girls do, about love and marriage. My suspicions were first aroused when I found that she had not been married in a church.

'I need not go through the details, nor worry you by telling you how I found out the truth, and the truth was sickening and revolting.

'Mr. Heriot, whom you know as Sir Vane and Lord Kelso, had most cruelly deceived this girl. She was as innocent as an angel, and he had taken advantage of her innocence. He had deceived her in the most heartless fashion, and, while she believed herself to be his wife, she was no more married to him than I, Lord Penrith, am married to you.'

A low wail from Lady Penrith, and again her husband soothed her with loving words.

'Do not forget that we have heard only one side, Philippa; there are always two sides to every question. Let us wait before we judge.'

'You shall have every chance of judging,' said Valerie; you shall bring us face to face.'

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## CHAPTER LXVI.

'LET HIM DENY IT IF HE CAN.'

THE persistent, quiet, methodical manner in which this story was told did at last touch Lord Penrith. It must be true, or she could not enter into such details. His brown, handsome face grew pale, his eyes were troubled, and a curious faint sickness of heart came over him. What would happen to Beatrice if this were true?

'I found out,' continued Valerie, 'that Mr. Heriot was really Sir Vane Heriot Carlyon, of Garswood, a rich English nobleman, and then I understood it. The girl with the fair, white soul of an angel, had been betrayed. I hesitated for some time what to do; to tell her seemed cruel as murder—oh, murder would have been more merciful, ten times more merciful; but I knew that she must know. I did not dare to tell my aunt, her anger and indignation would have been so great. Then, I must confess—I must tell a weakness of my own from which I shrink—I—I loved him; he made love to me—he wooed me, he flattered me and complimented me, until he won my heart. He said this much to me, that if he were free he would marry me; and I knew that he was free.'

Some low muttered words came from Lord Penrith. She went on :

'At last I told her the truth—it was a cruel, bitter truth to her—I told it in language strong enough to make her comprehend the difference between herself and other women who were classed as good. You may believe me ; I do not think that I am very sensitive, nor so tender of heart as other women are, but I felt when I was telling her that I was slaying her.

'She went away, no one knows how or whither. My own opinion is that she lies dead in the depths of Lake Lucerne. Do you call that a folly or a crime, Lord Penrith ?'

'A crime,' he repeated, solemnly.

'A crime,' she added, 'worse than murder. Murder only takes the human life from the human body, a crime like this destroys a soul. I have this more to add—she went away to her death, as I believe, and he after a long search for her, gave up all hope of finding her. He had told me that he would marry me if he were free, and I know now that he had been free all along ; I expected the fulfilment of his promise, but he—ah, Heaven ! how I hate him when I think of it—he taunted me, he sneered at me, cursed me because I had striven to take the girl from him ; cursed me with the same lips that only so lately had spoken to me of love ; and I—I swore vengeance against him—I told him that I would pursue him so long as I lived—that I would haunt him until death—that my vengeance should never fail.

'It is in accordance with my vow that I am here. Do not think me better than I am. I have not sought you to save your daughter from what seems to me worse than a living death—I have sought you and told you the truth about him in order to be revenged upon him ; if he stood at the altar I would stand by his side and proclaim to the whole world what I know. It is possible,' she continued, 'that you may not believe the story, it is possible you may believe it, yet, because he is a wealthy earl, you may still consent to your daughter's marriage, or perhaps that because you know your daughter loves him, and you do not wish to pain her, you may not interfere. I warn you—Lord Kelso promised to marry me, and while I live he shall not marry any other woman. I will go before him at the altar—I will denounce him before priest and

people ; if you let your daughter marry him, your name shall be allied with the greatest scandal ever known in the land. I warn you, and I do not warn you in vain.'

'I think,' said Lord Penrith, coldly, 'that you are a bad, vindictive, malignant woman.'

'I am quite sure of it,' she replied. 'I am even worse than that if you knew all ; but despite that my story is quite true.'

Lady Penrith raised her head.

'I do not believe it,' she said. 'Oh, Hildebrand, I am sure it is not true ; Lord Kelso loves Beatrice, and she—well you know, dear, that her life is wrapped up in his. Do not believe her—she hates him. It is only a cruel, malicious plot. I will not believe her—I will not, indeed.'

'You forget, Lady Penrith, that I have offered to prove all I have said. I can bring not one but a hundred witnesses to prove that I am right. I challenge you to bring Lord Kelso into my presence, and let him deny one word of this if he can. Remember I have only told you two stories, and that there are many others untold. I can give you no fairer proof that I am speaking the truth than this—bring him here face to face with me.'

Husband and wife looked at each other. Surely that seemed like truth and seemed honorable. She did not bring accusations against him in the dark, she asked to see him face to face.

'Bring him here,' she repeated, 'and if he denies one word of this, I will own that I am wrong, and that I have invented all I have said.'

Husband and wife looked still at each other—what was to be done ?

'I do not ask a favor that you should summon him,' she said ; 'I demand it as a right. I appeal to you—bring here this man who has spoiled my life, and see how he meets the charges made against him.'

Lord Penrith rang the bell and unlocked the door.

'Ask Lord Kelso if he will come here, he said to the servant man, and again there was a pause.

Valerie would have continued talking, but Lord Penrith said :

'There will be no need now for another word until he comes.'



Then he drew Lady Penrith away from the table to the end of the room, and the two stood in earnest conversation together.

Under the same roof at the same time two other scenes were taking place full of interest.

Agatha, knowing that Valerie was with Lord and Lady Penrith, was almost mad with suspense. Was it about her and about Vane that she was there? It must be one or the other. What would happen? Would she be sent away in disgrace, or would anything go wrong with Beatrice and Lord Kelso? 'I would rather die myself,' she said, 'than that anything should happen to Beatrice.'

She tried to attend to the children's lessons, but it was impossible; she could not even hear what they said; all her heart, thought and interest were with Valerie. What was she doing?—what was she saying? She could not hear it. She left the lessons and the children to their fate and went to her own room; while Lord Kelso and Beatrice, having half an hour to spare, had found their way to the music room. There was no fear of interruption, no fear of intruders, and happy Beatrice enjoyed half an hour with her stately lover.

'Oh, love, if you were only here,  
Beside me in this mellow light,  
Though all the bitter winds should blow  
And all the ways be choked with snow,  
'Twould be a true Arabian night.'

sang Beatrice, and Lord Kelso, smiling at the clear young voice and pretty words, said:

'I am here, Beatrice—you have but the one love, I suppose.'

'Only one,' said the girl, raising her eyes to his, 'and I shall never have another—you and you only. One life will not be enough to love you in.'

He felt, with a sharp pang of pain, how unworthy he was of this sweet, girlish idolatry. When he was with Beatrice, as with Agatha, he always wished himself a better man.

'My little love,' he whispered, 'I wish I were more worthy of your love, but I will do my best to make you very happy.'

'I could not be anything else but happy,' she said. 'I should be happy if even I only saw you once each day, but to be with you every day, and all day long, is too much happiness to bear

thinking about. I say to myself often it can never be true, I cannot realize it. When you have been staying here and go away again, it is just as though sunlight changed to darkest night. I am to live always in brightest sunshine, am I not ?'

'Yes, always, my darling,' he said, 'always.'

Just then a footman came to the door with a message that Lord Penrith would be much obliged if Lord Kelso would go to him at once, he wanted to see him.

'That is unkind,' said Beatrice, 'just the only few minutes I have to spend with you. If papa knew how cruel it was, he would never have sent for you.'

She smiled as he bent down and kissed her lips, whispering some loving words to her, and no one living ever saw the same smile on her face again.

He went, wondering what particular business the earl could have with him just before dinner, and regretted that he had not spent the half hour with Beatrice—it was too bad. He had no more idea of what awaited him than a laughing child has of grim death.

'Come in !' said Lord Penrith, who was longing to be able to speak his mind, but who was restrained by prudence for a time.

Lord Kelso went in. They knew he was guilty, and that she had spoken the truth when they saw his face—as it looked when his eyes fell upon her.

Lord Penrith left his wife's side, and advanced to meet him. 'I want you, Lord Kelso,' he said. 'This lady, Mademoiselle d'Envers, has come here expressly to make certain charges against you. I would not believe them, but she challenged me to bring you face to face with her.'

The woman loved him—her face changed, paled, grew crimson and quivered ; her eyes glowed and darkened.

Lord Kelso, who had quickly recovered his self-possession, turned to her with a bow, which she returned.

'This is your vengeance,' he said.

'Yes,' she replied, 'this is my vengeance.'

'Will you answer some questions, Lord Kelso,' she said, 'questions which I shall ask on your honor as a gentleman ?'

He looked contemptuously at her, but made no reply.

'Is the story told of you and Lady G—— true or not ?' she asked.

'Of what consequence can it be to you?' he replied. 'I would not condescend to answer you.'

'No! I felt sure that you would speak the truth; if not, Lord Penrith, who wishes to know the truth, had better put the question himself.'

'Is it true?' asked Lord Penrith, with a dark frown.

'I am ashamed to say that it is perfectly true,' he replied.

It was a horrible crime, but if anything could redeem it, it was the frank, manly fashion in which he owned it.

'You see that I was right!' cried Valerie, in triumph.

'Now let him deny, if he can, that he deceived one of the most innocent and beautiful girls in the world; that he made her believe in some wretched attempt at a mock marriage, and took her away with him to Switzerland, where she lived with him for some time, believing herself to be his wife. Is this true?'

He looked at Lord Penrith as though the question came from him.

'To my eternal regret, sorrow, and condemnation, he replied, 'it is true.'

There was a dead silence for one half minute, then a muttered curse fell from the white lips of Lord Penrith, and again Valerie cried, in triumph,

'You see now that I have spoken the truth.'

## CHAPTER} LXVII.

### DOOMED TO A LIFE-LONG SORROW.

**L**ORD Kelso was not a hardened man—he recoiled with pain when Lady Penrith turned her white face, haggard with misery, to him.

'Why have you done this to my Beatrice? What has she done to you that you should spoil her life? Oh, Heaven! who is to tell her, and she preparing for her wedding-day?'

Lord Kelso's voice was full of emotion as he said:

'Lady Penrith, I do not know in what words to answer you. I wish that I had been dead before I brought this trouble to you and to Beatrice. I wish, indeed, that I had died. Will you listen to me for a few minutes? I cannot make any excuses for myself; I do not wish to make less of my sin, but let me say this much for myself—if I had my life to live over again, I would act differently. I say it, with tears and sorrow of contrition, that I have never studied anything except myself, and my own pleasures. Only Heaven knows whether it will be any excuse for me to say that I was never taught. I was born the heir to great wealth, and I always thought I could do as I liked. I am not all bad. I believe that if any one had ever said to me that self-control and self-restraint were noble, I might have tried to be noble. As it was, quite naturally, I thought of nothing but my own pleasure. I have never done what the world would call a mean thing. I have been generous—I may even say charitable—but I have not respected the claims of women. I am doubly ashamed to say it in the presence of such a woman as you, Lady Penrith, but I am afraid I have merely looked upon them as toys. I have found out my mistake—they have the virtues of angels, the vices of devils. I love Beatrice. I feel that my lips are not worthy to mention her name. I love her because she is so much like an angel.'

He turned to Valerie.

'You can say what more you will,' he said, quietly; 'you had your revenge.'

'Yes, I have had it, and the taste of it is sweet to my lips,' she said.

Lord Kelso turned to the unhappy parents.

'Whatever you have to say to me wait until this woman has gone. She has had her vengeance, let her go.'

'I have more to say before I go,' said Valerie, 'It is easy to deceive a foolish woman—it is easy to betray innocence or simplicity—but it is not so easy to deceive and betray a French noblewoman. I told you that my revenge should last my life. Every time you attempt to make any woman believe in you, or attempt to make any woman marry you, I will repeat what I have done this time.'

He made no answer—a contemptuous smile curled his lips. A woman's threats would never move him.

'I will not retaliate upon a woman,' he said, 'or I might, in my turn, make certain revelations not very pleasant for Mademoiselle d'Envers to hear. Out of contemptuous pity I will keep her secret. She has told you some of the truth, but she has not told you what a snake in the grass she proved herself to the girl whom she drove to her death. I tell you honestly that I loved that girl with my whole heart, and I would have married her legally and properly long ago but that I was ashamed to let her know I had deceived her before. If that woman, with her horrible treachery, had not come between us, in all probability we should have been married. I love Beatrice because she resembles in her purity, her innocence, and sweet gaiety the girl whom this woman murdered with false words.'

'Hush!' cried Lord Penrith. 'You must never mention my daughter's name again?'

Lord Kelso's handsome face grew deadly pale.

'Is it so!' he said. 'I cannot complain. You see, Mademoiselle, your work is well done—your revenge is very complete. You have doomed a bright, happy, loving girl to a life-long sorrow. She, whose name I may never more mention, need never have known of my wrong-doing; hundreds of men have done the same thing, but they have settled down afterward, have married good women, and have so become good men, I might have done the same—living with one so good and pure would have made a good man of me. I could have protected her from all evil, and have made her very happy. The recollections of what she had been saying when he left her came back to him, his voice faltered and the tears came to his eyes. 'You have had full vengeance, mademoiselle; I scorn to retaliate. If you wish to know whether you have succeeded in making me suffer, yes, you have done so—I do suffer, and I shall suffer all my life. You need not be proud of the feat you have accomplished. Lord Penrith, when this person is gone, we will speak together.'

Lord Penrith made no answer; thinking of Beatrice, it was with great difficulty that he refrained from taking the man before him by the throat and ending the life that seemed to him accursed. Lady Penrith read his thoughts in his agitated face and trembling frame.

'Nay, dearest Hildebrand,' she said, that will make matters worse. Be calm and patient—blind, hot rage will not help us.'

Valerie made a sweeping bow.

'My mission is accomplished,' she said. 'You know Lord Penrith, if any one attempts to win your consent to this marriage what will happen. I shall be there. I shall stand by the altar and the priest to denounce him, and your name shall be associated with the greatest scandal that has ever been known even in this land of scandals.'

'Threats would never deter me from doing what I thought right,' said Lord Penrith.

Then, without another word, he opened the door and held it—a hint that no person could mistake.

'I must express my opinion of you,' he said to her, 'Lord Kelso does not shine in the stories you have told, but the most contemptible person I know or have heard of—is yourself.'

Lady Penrith said no word as the woman who had marred her daughter's life passed out of sight; but she stood there with a look on her face that hurt Lord Kelso more than anything else in this world.

'Who is to comfort my child?' she said to her husband. 'Who is to tell her?'

Then Lord Kelso went nearer to her, and bowed his head before her.

'Lady Penrith,' he pleaded, 'will you listen to me? Need this cruel deed be done?—need Beatrice be told? My follies or sins were all over before I ever saw her. Since I have known her I have been true to her in thought, word and deed, just because she is so sweet and innocent. I would respect her innocence, and shield her with the best strength of a man. Could you forgive me?'

The passionate sorrow in his voice touched her gentle heart.

'I could forgive you,' she said; 'but I could never give you my beautiful, loving child.'

'Think better of it!' he cried, with passionate energy. 'I own my crime—I have done wrong; I am heartily sorry for it! I would undo it if I could; I would make any atonement I could—no man can do more.'

'That is true; but what you have done quite unfits you to be my daughter's husband. I should never rest for thinking of her—I should never be happy about her. I am one of those who consider the destruction of the soul as far worse than the ruin of the body.'

Lord Penrith looked at Lord Kelso.

'If my wife should give my daughter to you, I would not. I would sooner a thousand times see her lying dead!'

Lord Kelso uttered a cry of despair.

'It seems unmanly to plead against your decision,' he said, 'but do, for Heaven's sake, stop and think. If you send me away, you make Beatrice suffer for my sins. What has Beatrice done?'

'Nothing—that is the cruelest part of it,' said Lord Penrith. 'She may suffer, and she will suffer. Better that than to link her life with such a life as yours.'

'You are too hard,' groaned Lord Kelso.

'I do not think so,' said Lord Penrith.

Then they were silent, while the carriage wheels—of the woman who had come down upon them like a whirlwind, rolled down the avenue.

'We have to consider our name,' said Lord Penrith. 'Even, if my wife and myself were willing now to give our daughter to you, you remember what that woman said—that she would denounce you before the priest and the people, and that such a scandal should hang round your name as has never been heard before—you remember.'

'She would not dare to do anything of the kind,' he cried, indignantly.

'She would both dare and do,' said the earl. 'No such scandal must attach itself to my beloved child. The matter is ended, and forever. My strongest condemnation and reprobation rest with you. You have wronged Heaven and man, your soul wants washing in tears of penitence, your life reforming; but under no circumstances whatever can you be permitted to see Beatrice again. The proper and manly course will be for you to leave Penrith at once.'

Even he, in his righteous anger, was struck by the keen pain on the handsome face before him. A low cry came from the earl's lips.

'My little love?' he said to himself. He looked up at Lord Penrith with haggard eyes. 'Do you know,' he cried, 'that I left her half an hour ago with loving words on her lips, and that she was waiting for me. She asked me not to be long, and I promised to hurry back to her. You cannot be so cruel as to say that I must not see her again, my little, loving love!' and the strong man—the man who had thought so little of the sufferings of others—covered his face with his hands and wept aloud, such tears as men weep only once in life, and that is when their dearest hope is slain.

Even those who were incensed against him felt sorry for him in that hour,

'I *must* see her once more!' he cried. 'I shall go mad if you forbid it. Just once—oh, Lady Penrith, you have a woman's heart, and it must be a kind one, let me see her once—only once.'

Lady Penrith held up her hand.

'I shall look upon you always as my child's murderer,' she said. 'Beatrice will never be happy again.'

'But you will let me see her?' he pleaded. 'Once—only once?'

'It must rest with Lord Penrith,' she replied.

'It must rest with Beatrice herself,' said Lord Penrith. 'If it will lessen her sorrow, and she wishes to say good-by to you she may do so, but—it must be good-by. What do you propose to do? I wish you to leave my house at once.'

'My punishment is hard, cried Lord Kelso—harder than I can bear.'

'I wish you to leave at once, said Lord Penrith. 'I will send word to my daughter that you have been compelled to return to London on particular business. Do not give either Lady Penrith or myself the pain of looking upon you again.'

'But you will let me see her once again to say good-by? You will not refuse me?—it is the desperate prayer of a desperate man.'

'I will consider it. If my daughter asks me I shall not refuse her, but I shall take her out of England at once.'

In silence Lord Kelso quitted the room.



## CHAPTER LXVIII.

## THE FATHER'S EXPLANATION.

**F**VERY fashionable newspaper in London had the same paragraph :

“POSTPONEMENT OF THE MARRIAGE OF THE EARL OF KELSO :—The marriage of Lord Kelso is postponed, owing to the very serious illness of Miss Penrith, whose condition is a source of great anxiety to her relations.”

Those lines did not tell much of the tragedy which had taken place at Penrith Castle, but that told all the outer world ever knew. In one of the grand old rooms overlooking the river with its rush of waters, and the woods—a room, large, bright, and lofty—a young girl lay, doing hard battle with death, lay like a bruised flower, like a broken lily, her fair head tossing wildly on the pillow, a wistful, hunted look in her eyes, as though the pain were too great. She longed to die, while all in the house moved with silent footsteps, and the sound of a laugh was never heard. It was as though the sun set, and everlasting night reigned. That bright, beautiful Beatrice should be lying there, the golden hair all down, the beautiful face either white or worn, or flushed and fevered ; sick unto death—with that one fever for which there is no cure.

She looked at the doctor who came to attend her.

‘Do not try to cure me,’ she said to him. ‘Let me die !’—that was the burden of her song—“let me die !”

She had not said much when they told her. She listened to all, and when Lord Penrith had finished, she cried out :

‘You say I must give him up. I cannot ! I cannot !’ She wrung her hands with a low cry, a despairing gesture. ‘I cannot !’ she repeated. ‘I am sorry he has not been a good man ; but good or wicked, I love him and I cannot give him up.’

She listened with a ghastly face, while Lord Penrith told her the story, in the best and kindest words he could find.

'If his own sins did not lie like a great gulf between you, Beatrice,' he said, 'you could not marry him. That fair young name of yours must not be blackened with calumny, and that woman will keep her word. You must try to forget him.'

'Forget him, papa! I will—when my heart forgets to beat and my eyes forget to see. I will forget him—when the sun is darkened and the moon gives no light, when my body forgets my soul, and Heaven forgets me—then will I forget my earl—my earl!'

'My Beatrice,' said her father, gently, 'you are too good, too noble to love a worthless man.'

'He is not worthless,' she repeated. 'He may have been wicked, he may have done all these terrible things you say, but he is not worthless.'

She listened to him with a face so ghastly, and with trembling hands, with such anguish in her eyes, that Lord Penrith said to himself it was worse than slaying her. Every now and then the white hands were clenched, as if the pain were unendurable.

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When Lord Kelso left the room that evening, husband and wife turned and looked at each other in silence. Lady Penrith was the first to break it. With pale, trembling lips, she said to him :

'What shall we do, Hildebrand—who is to tell her? I cannot. She will die, my beautiful, wounded dove—she will die?'

'Ah, no; grief does not kill so quickly; it would be better if it did.'

'I loved you, Hildebrand,' she said, gently, 'and I am quite sure that if the same thing had happened to me, it would indeed have been my death.'

Lord Penrith kissed his wife's troubled face.

'We must do the best we can for her, my darling,' he said, 'and the best, Heaven knows, is bad enough. I will break it to her; she will suffer less with me, perhaps, than with you. Heaven help me! If ever I meet that man again, and there is no restraint upon me, it will be his life or mine. Philippa, darling, try to cheer up; it may not be so bad. She is young; she may soon recover; she may not take it so deeply to heart.'

Time heals all wounds, even the wounds of death. In three or four years she will have forgotten him, let us hope.'

But even as he spoke, his heart was heavy, and Lady Penrith only wept the more.

'I feel,' she said, 'as though I had been stabbed to the heart; I feel as though I could never leave this room and face life again.'

'Go to your own room, Philippa. Yet, no; for her sake we must keep up appearances; we must not let the servants suspect anything; we must go to dinner as usual, and endure the ordeal in the best way we can. I shall tell Beatrice that Lord Kelso has gone to town on important business; then you can go to your room, and I will break it to the poor child. We must shield her; we must think for her. It will never do to have any of this known. The least hint of it would be the child's ruin. Remember how much of her future depends on your self-control now;' and those few words gave the unhappy mother courage to help Beatrice. She would bear and suffer much.

All was done as he wished. The news soon spread throughout the castle that Lord Kelso was suddenly summoned to London, and no one had the wit to connect his sudden journey with the appearance of the foreign woman who had demanded to see Lady Penrith. Husband and wife left the room where Lady Penrith had heard what she knew to be her daughter's death-knell. She went to her room; he sought his daughter.

He heard her now in the music-room; she was sitting where her lover had left her, singing over and over again to herself the beautiful lines of the sweetheart song:

'Oh, love for a year, a month, a day,  
But alas for the love that loves away.'

He stood for a moment and looked at her—that peaceful, tender expression was never to be on her face again. He thought of an innocent lamb with a knife at its throat—of a white dove with the cruel bat that is tearing its innocent heart; and, strong as he was, his heart grew sick at the thought. Suddenly Beatrice saw him, and she sprang from her seat with a joyful cry

'Papa! why did you send for my earl? How cruel it was of you, That one half-hour in the music-room is the only time

we have just before dinner ; and we have so much to say—I tell him everything.'

A happy, dreamy smile came over her face, and in the full gladness of her heart she kissed her father's hand.

It was strange that he made no answer, but looked at her with an indescribable something in his face.

'Where is Lord Kelso, papa?' she cried. 'He said he would not be long.'

What was he to say to her, when he knew that in this life she would never see him again?

## CHAPTER LXIX.

## NIGHT FOR EVERMORE.

'**M**Y dear Beatrice,' he said, gently, you must try not to be disappointed. Lord Kelso has been suddenly summoned to London.'

How could he go on? She started as though she had been shot; the lovely color died from her face, leaving the very lips white; a dark shadow came into her eyes.

'To London! Oh, papa, it cannot be true. You are jesting; but it is a cruel jest—a horrible jest! Let me go to him.'

'My dearest Beatrice, it is no jest, and he had no time to see you; he was compelled to go by the next train, and he had not one moment to spare.'

'Papa!' she cried, looking at him with great, solemn eyes, her face growing more ghastly in its pallor,—'papa, tell me the truth. Is he dead?'

'Dead!' cried Lord Penrith. 'No, child, certainly not, it is as I tell you. He has been obliged to start suddenly for London, and he had not time to see you.'

She laid her hand on her heart.

'I have a strange feeling here,' she said, quietly—'such a strange feeling, papa, as if something had happened to him.'

'Why did you ask me if he were dead?' asked Lord Penrith, who had hardly recovered from the shock of the question.

'I did not think he could leave me without one word or one kiss,' she said slowly. 'It is so unlike him; he never forgets me, no matter how great his hurry is. It would not have taken him one moment to have said, 'Good-by, Beatrice, I am coming back to-morrow. It was cruel of him,' she said, in her soft, gentle voice. 'He said he would not be more than a few minutes away. What shall I do, papa?'

And she looked wistfully in his face.

What could *he* say, who knew that she would never see him more.

'I cannot help thinking there is something wrong,' she continued. 'It would be better to tell me. He is ill, perhaps, or there is some misfortune. I am quite sure he would not go to London without speaking to me.'

'It is not pleasant business that has taken him away, and he was certainly much put out.'

'That would not matter,' she said: 'nothing but death would make him forget me. If he had unpleasant business, he should have told me, and I would have comforted him. Papa,' she continued, eagerly, 'if he has lost all his money, you would not let that part us?'

'No, my darling,' he said, gently; 'money should not part you.'

'Was it about this same business that you sent for him, papa?' she said, and something of relief came over her face.

If her wise, kind, good father knew it, there could be nothing wrong.

'Yes,' he replied, 'it was business that came to my knowledge, and I sent to tell him.'

'Ah, then, it will be all right if you know, papa; you are so wise, so good, so clever. You can do anything. When will he come back? Will he come to-morrow?'

She laughed, a curious, wistful laugh that he never forgot.

'I hope he will not be long away. I do not know what I should do now, papa, without him. It would be like living without sunshine or flowers, or anything else that makes life bright. When will he come back again?'

'I do not know, it is not certain—ah, there is the dinner-

bell ! I am a very poor substitute for Lord Kelso—let me take you into dinner, Beatrice.'

And so long as he lives, Lord Penrith will never forget that dinner, will never forget the effort he had to get through it. Lady Penrith came down, and they contrived to get up some kind of conversation, but it was easy to see how great the effort was. Beatrice grew more and more sure every moment that something was wrong ; how great and terrible that wrong was she little dreamed.

When dinner was over, Lady Penrith went to her own room and Lord Penrith took his daughter to the drawing-room to tell her the truth.

Never again in his life, Lord Penrith said to himself, could he ever go through such a scene ; it was over at last, and she knew that she would never see the man she loved so dearly again—except to bid him farewell. On the whole, she had borne it better and more quietly than he had dared to hope ; she had finished speaking, she had said the last word, and she was sitting in the easy-chair he had placed for her, pale and silent, her hands folded, her eyes half closed. Lord Penrith took her in his arms and kissed her.

'You cannot tell the torture it has been to me to tell you you this, Beatrice ; and your mother, she feels it so keenly that she is quite ill. You are a good, brave child, and you have borne it well. Your mother, I know, is breaking her heart over you. Let me take some message to her that will console her and cheer her.'

There was little enough to cheer or console in the white face raised to his—little enough. She tried to smile, but there was only a quiver on the white lips.

'You are very kind to me, papa,' she said. 'Very kind. Tell dear mamma that I have heard it—all—yet that I am not dead.'

He bent over her in infinite distress, the simple, pitiful words went through his heart, for they hinted to him a state of distress greater than he could imagine. He made her lie down on the couch ; he begged her to try to read ; he found for her an amusing book, which he opened at an amusing chapter ; he left her with cheering words, hoping in his inmost heart that the worst was over. He went to Lady Penrith, and told her the very words.

'Did she say that she had heard it, yet is not dead: Ah! then it is worse even than I feared. Go back to her. Hildebrand do not leave her.'

But when Lord Penrith went back he found that Beatrice was lying where he had left her, but cold, white, and senseless; at first he thought that she was dead; after a time he found that her heart was still beating; still, for her sake, desirous of keeping up appearances, he went at once to Lady Penrith.

'There is one person we can trust, and trust entirely,' she said; 'that is Miss Brooke; go and bring her. I will go to Beatrice.'

Lord Penrith found Miss Brooke in the school-room trying to read, but really ill with suspense; she, with the rest of the household, had heard that Lord Kelso had left suddenly for London, and she, knowing that Valerie had been there, felt certain that something terrible had happened. Lord Penrith was too ill and too anxious himself to notice the condition in which he found his governess.

Lady Penrith wants you, Miss Brooke,' he said. 'We are in great trouble; will you come to her?'

In silence he led the way to the drawing-room, and in silence she followed him. Beatrice lay there white and silent. Lady Penrith bending over her in a passion of tears.

'It has killed her, Hildebrand,' she cried. 'I knew it would.'

'Hush, Philippa!' said her husband, as he carefully locked the door. 'Remember that her whole future depends on your self-control now.'

'She will have no future!' cried Lady Penrith, with falling tears, 'She is dead!'

Agatha knelt down by the white, silent figure; was there ever anything so like a broken lily?' she said, quietly.

'Beatrice is not dead, Lady Penrith; she has fainted. I do not even think that she is going to die. Is she ill?'

'Tell Miss Brooke, Hildebrand,' said Lady Penrith; 'we may trust her; she will keep our secret.'

'You may trust me Lady Penrith,' said Agatha, gently, 'I will do all I can for you or for Beatrice.'

'It is a horrible thing to tell you, Miss Brooke,' said Lord Penrith; 'but like my wife, I have the most implicit confidence

in you. You know how the poor child loved Lord Kelso. We have heard that about him to-day which has caused me to dismiss him from the house—to forbid him to seek my daughter again, and, of course, it has entirely put an end to the engagement.'

Her heart beat so quickly, she feared lest they should hear it. This was the object of Valerie's visit then.

'Do you think it true?' she asked, with white, quivering lips.

'I know it—he admitted it,' said Lord Penrith.

'Would you mind very much telling me what it was?' she asked.

She could not help the question, and it did not strike him as being unusual.

'I cannot tell you all. There was a little story about some Lady G——, which I could not repeat. There was another of some good and innocent girl, whom he had cruelly deceived.'

For a moment a great mist came before her eyes, and she feared lest she should fall dead at his feet. It was of her he was speaking; it was her own sad story that had almost killed Beatrice, and had parted her from her lover.

'In fact,' continued the earl, 'his character is not that of an honorable man. I would not trust my child's happiness with him. There was something about herself, too—the woman, I mean, who came to tell us—he had promised to marry her, if he were free.'

He wondered why she turned from him with that sharp, sudden cry, and knelt down again by his daughter's side.

For a few minutes the whole world was chaos to her; he was even more worthless than she had thought. If this were true, even while she was still with him he had been making love to Valerie, and had promised to marry her—if it were true!

'The woman told us frankly,' continued Lord Penrith, 'that her motive was not to save Beatrice or to warn us, but to take vengeance on him.'

Then it was true, he must have made that promise to Valerie even while she was with him. A low, bitter cry came from her lips. She had not believed it possible that she could suffer more, but this was harder than all to bear. Then her thoughts



left herself as she looked at the pallid young face, which was as the face of the dead. It was the same sin—the same man.

'I know it will kill her,' said Lady Penrith. 'What must we do, Miss Brooke?'

Agatha thought of the time when she had lain under the trees, her heart broken, her life crushed. It was the same sin, the same man. She remembered that nothing had soothed her pain, and nothing, she felt sure, would help Beatrice.

They had all the remedies they could think of, and the eyes that were never more to shine with a child's glee, opened at last. She only woke from the trance of pain to fall into such a passion of sobs and tears as frightened them all.

'Leave her to me, Lady Penrith,' said Agatha, at last. 'She has told me all her love affairs; she made me her confidante. I feel sure that I can manage her better alone.'

Father and mother were only too pleased to do anything Agatha suggested. They left her alone with the weeping girl. The same sin—the same man—was that the reason that Agatha drew the golden head to her breast?

'Cry, my darling,' she said; never mind if your tears scald me—cry, it will take the sting from your pain.'

And Beatrice did cry, in a hopeless fashion that was pitiful to hear. Once she clung around Agatha's neck.

'I do not care what he has done,' she said. 'I cannot give him up; tell them—they must send for him, or I shall die. I must see him—I must look in his face, or I shall die.'

'There are some things worse than death,' said Agatha, 'shame is worse, and sin is worse.'

Even in the midst of her terrible pain, Beatrice wondered why Agatha's face was as the face of an angel, so full of compassion and love; why she soothed her with skill and tenderness that no one else in the world could have used. She wondered, in dull, dreary fashion, if Agatha had ever gone through a great trouble.

At last Agatha was able to go to Lady Penrith and tell her that she had taken Beatrice to her own room, and was going to sit up all night with her. She did so; and Agatha will never forget the night. There were times when exhausted by her passionate tears, that Beatrice seemed to fall asleep, and she would make such despairing cries that Agatha's heart

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almost stood still ; but toward morning, when the red dawn came in the sky, she grew restless, her face was flushed, and her eyes bright.

'I knew,' she said, 'that it was too bright to last. It was like living always in the sunshine. I told him yesterday I could not realize the happiness of being with him always ; and now I am not to see him again. I told him so. I stretch out my hand, thinking I must see him. I cry out to him, and I think he will answer. He seems to be standing there, and there ; but when I go to him he fades away—fades quite away, and the dark, beautiful face is so sorrowful. I told you, did I not, that the first time I saw him I was struck by the sadness in his eyes ? That shows he was not a wicked man. Wicked men do not look sad ; they do not care enough to look sad. Ah, my earl—my earl with the beautiful eyes, come back to me !'

And then Agatha tried—but vainly—to teach her how much better it was to be patient and bear.

'You would not think so if he had been your lover. You cannot tell what he was, because he never loved you ; but he loved me. He loved me, and I cannot lose him.'

The same sin and the same man ! Yet Agatha dared not tell her so—dared not tell her that she had suffered before every pang that Beatrice was suffering now.

Beatrice raised her flushed face and bright eyes from the pillow.

'I am quite determined over one thing,' she said—'I will not let papa or mamma see how it hurts me ; the more they see me suffer, the more they will dislike him. It will be quite morning soon ; I shall get up and do everything just as I have been accustomed to, only'—and a great, dreary sob for a few minutes choked her—'only there will be no love to think about, and no wedding-day.'

'I shall not complain,' she went on ; 'and then, if they do not see that I am very unhappy, they will think less unkindly of him. What a long night it has been, and how good you have been to sit up with me. It will be night now with me forever and forever more. No more sunlight.'

Then Agatha whispered to her that when the sun shone no more on earth, and one bore the darkness quite patiently for a time, there would be a glorious sunlight in Heaven.

'Ah, in Heaven,' sighed the girl, drearily. 'Do not think I am wicked, Miss Brooke, but do you believe that for me there can be any Heaven without him?'

'Yes, everything in this world is as nothing compared with the life to come. You will understand that when human love is dead in your heart.'

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## CHAPTER LXX.

### A LAST REQUEST.

THE resolution that Beatrice had made she tried to keep. Although the next morning she felt very ill, she would rise and go down as usual, take breakfast with Lord and Lady Penrith, go about her daily avocations.

'It was better for his sake,' she repeated to herself, when her strength failed her, 'they would blame him less.'

But there was something so wistful, so pathetic in the girl's face, that both parents felt it much worse than if she had spent the day in weeping.

When Lady Penrith asked her to drive out with her, she was willing, and during her absence, Agatha, by her mother's wish collected everything—every souvenir of Lord Kelso, and they were stored away in one of the great wardrobes. All the wedding trousseau, the dresses, the laces, the furs, the jewels were locked away; all the books he had given her, all the music, the numerous presents, nothing was left about that could in any way remind her of him.

If she noticed it on her return, she said nothing, she made no remark or comment; she never inquired where anything was; but that night her face was so white and death-like Lady Penrith was alarmed.

'She cannot keep it up,' she said to her husband; 'she will break down and die.'

Lord Penrith was more cheerful. She was making a great effort, he said, and he thought she would get over it.

No one knew that there was anything wrong—every one knew that Lord Kelso had gone up to town on sudden and important business.

'The marriage settlements, my dear,' whispered one dowager to another, 'I hear they are magnificent.'

Lord Penrith had made up his mind as to his course of action. He wished the whole matter to remain in abeyance the next two weeks, during which he intended to make arrangements for taking his family abroad until the whole affair was forgotten. He did not wish one word to be said until they had started, for he knew well his proud, beautiful Beatrice would never bear the comments made—never bear the remarks and condolences—he must take her away from them.

When they had left England, then there could be an announcement in the papers that the engagement was broken off and the anticipated marriage at an end. Beatrice would be out of reach of gossip then; she could not hear the comments of the curious, and he would take care that she did not return to England until it was forgotten. He confided his plans to no one except Lady Penrith, and she quite agreed with them.

People said that Miss Penrith was not looking well. She kept out of all observation as well as she could, but if she had to see visitors or go anywhere with Lady Penrith to make a call, she went through it bravely. It was only afterward that they knew what the effort cost her—afterward when they had found out that she had worn away her strength, even to the last remnant of her life. She grew paler and thinner every day; it was marvellous to see the change that came over her bright young loveliness; the color left her face, and her eyes were always dim and heavy with long weeping. All the pretty, girlish graces were gone; she did her best, but her heart was crushed.

How she lived through the long torture of each day she never knew; the only comfort she had was in going to Agatha. Agatha grew accustomed to seeing the pale, wistful face at the school-room door. Whatever she was doing or might be her occupation, she instantly put it aside and hastened to her.

'Will you read to me, Miss Brooke?' she would say; 'I am so tired.'

She would lay her burning head on Agatha's knee.

'I am always so tired,' she said, 'and your reading soothes me.'

So Agatha read in a voice sweet as music, but she knew that the girl never heard one word; she was thinking all the time of her love and her sorrow. And Agatha noticed how thin and pale she was growing; her hand was almost transparent, and a great fear came to her lest the girl should die—should fade away, and no one realize the fact until it was too late to save her. It was only ten days since Valerie's evil presence had overshadowed the house—only ten days, but it seemed like an age.

'Beatrice looks very ill,' said Lady Penrith to her husband one morning; 'let us get away as soon as we can. It is not that she has lost all the color and her strength, but for the last day or two her eyes are quite wild, and they have a dazed expression in them that frightens me.'

'I am using all the speed possible,' said Lord Penrith.

But something happened that same day which showed him all his plans, arrangements, and precautions were quite in vain.

He was sitting in the library, after luncheon, busily engaged in writing letters about the journey, when Beatrice came into the room. The sunlight from the window fell full upon her, and he was horrified at seeing how terribly ill she looked. He could hardly believe that she was the brilliant, beautiful Beatrice of two short weeks since.

'I have come to sit with you, papa,' she said. 'Lady Chavasse is with mamma, and they are talking; my head aches. May I stay here?'

'You look very tired, Beatrice. I should think sleep would do you good.'

She shuddered at the word.

'I dread sleep, papa,' she said. 'Sleep means dreams, and dreams mean death.'

He drew the couch near to the fire.

'Rest, my darling,' he said, 'here is a soft pillow for your head. Close your eyes, they look quite tired and strained, dear. Have you been crying, Beatrice?'

'No, papa, my head aches, it has a queer burning pain.'

Do not let me interrupt you ; I felt nervous, and I wanted to be near you.'

And suddenly, it seemed to him, she was fast asleep. She looked like a beautiful statue, there was no color about her, except the gold of her hair, the dark pencilled brows, and her sweet sensitive lips. How white and worn she was ; her hands were quite transparent ; the lovely dimples he could no longer see, the face was worn and thin.

'Good Heavens !' he cried to himself, 'the child is dying before our very eyes, and we have not seen it.'

He watched her in silence. If the man who had taken that young heart had been there in that moment, it would have gone strangely with him.

Lord Penrith was a strong man, by no means given to sentiment or emotion, but his eyes filled with tears as he watched the silent figure ; he had not realized till then how desperately ill and changed she was. She was muttering something in her sleep ; he would not listen, but he heard the words. 'My love, my love !' and then, to his infinite distress, she was awake, and clinging to him with bitter cries.

'I fell asleep, papa. Oh, do not let me sleep again ? I always see him in my dreams ; he comes to me and tells me it is all a mistake—that I must wake up and talk to him. Then, when I wake I remember.'

'My darling Beatrice !' cried Lord Penrith, 'what can I do for you ?'

'Kill me !' she said. 'There was a father in history who slew his daughter—slay me ?'

She bared her white throat before him.

'Kill me !' she cried. 'The only kindness left for me is death. A knife here will not hurt me as much as the sword in my heart does, papa. I knew I could not live without him.'

The words came slowly, the last one died away, and she fell on her face with a cry that he never forgot.

That was how her illness began and the end of it, for a long time, no one could foresee. It was not fever, although her mind wandered, and her lips never ceased the low muttering of unintelligible words. The doctors who came round her could give her illness no name, but they seemed to think she would never recover. Agatha seldom left her—the duties of

the school-room were placed in other hands. Agatha found that the most painful part of the watching was this, that whenever the hapless girl fell asleep she had the self-same dream; it was that her lover came to her, told her it was a mistake, that there was no truth in those foolish stories, and that she must wake up and talk to him—always the same dream.

The doctors could do nothing, and rumor said the beautiful Beatrice Penrith must die. Then paragraphs filled the papers, and the county people told each other how sad it was that so brilliant a marriage must be postponed. Many a wise old dowager repeated to herself the proverb, 'A marriage delayed is a marriage marred,' but no one seemed to think it strange that Lord Kelso did not go to the castle. Beatrice had read the opinions of the doctors in their faces.

'I am to die,' she said to Agatha. 'I am so glad, so thankful! I shall rest there without these cruel dreams. Tell him, my earl, if you see him, that if he comes to my grave and calls my name, I shall hear him. Do you think they would let me see him before I die?'

But Agatha could not answer for her fast-falling tears.

That same evening Lord Penrith went to see his daughter, and with one thin, pale hand, she drew his face down to hers.

'Papa, I want to ask you a favor—the last I shall ever ask you in this world. Will you grant it?'

'I will, my darling, if I can,' he replied.

'You can, dear, if you will,' she said. 'I am going to die. No one says so; but I read it on the face of every one who comes near me. Let me see him before I die, will you?'

'My darling!' he cried, 'can you ask me no other favor than that?'

'No,' she said. 'You must grant it. If you do not, I shall not rest in my grave. I must see him. It is not as you think,' she added. 'I do not know how long I have been lying here, but my illness has changed me. It is not that human love now. I will tell you why I want to see him. He did love me—ah, do not shake your head, papa—he did love me, and I think if I could see him and talk to him, I could make him a better man. Are you willing, papa?'

'Oh, child, it tears my heart!' he cried.

'But you will say "yes?" You need not see him, and I will not keep him long. If you say "yes," papa, I shall sleep to-night, for I am so tired.'

He said yes, and on the day following Lord Kelso received a telegram asking him to go to Penrith Castle at once.

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CHAPTER LXXI.

'I TOUCH THE HANDS OF MEN OF HONOR.'

HERE was nothing thought about on that day but the coming of the earl. Lord and Lady Penrith had opposed it at first, but now they believed her to be dying and as this was the last prayer she would ever make to them, they granted it.

'You will not let me see him, Hildebrand?' said Lady Penrith to her husband; 'I could not bear it.'

'There will be no need,' he replied, 'I must see him myself, but you need not be tortured by the sight of him.'

There was one other person to whom the coming of the earl meant much, and that was Agatha. She had suffered greatly; she found that in her heart great love for him lived still. She knew it by the infinite pity that was there—pity for his sorrow—and greater pity of all, for his soul. A longing to see him, to console him, to try to lead him to a higher and nobler life, came over her, as comes to all good women over the men they love. Yet it could not be—she could not see him.

Lady Penrith had gone to the school-room on the morning of the earl's expected visit. Beatrice was exceedingly ill, and the greatest anxiety prevailed over her. She told Agatha that Lord Kelso was coming, and that she dreaded the day.

'I do not wish the children to see him, Miss Brooke,' she continued, 'they were so much attached to him, and he was so fond of them. You will keep them in the school-room, and not let them know anything about it.'



'I will do anything and everything your ladyship wishes or desires,' said Agatha.

If she could have done so, she would have borne all the trouble and sorrow for each one.

'The fair loving child!' cried Lady Penrith. 'Oh, Miss Brooke, why should this stern, strange, horrible fate have overtaken her? What a loving heart she has. I can see that all her life, past, present and future, is centred in this one hour in which she will see him. She lies like a broken lily, no pain on her face, but anxious waiting; her face quivers at every sound, yet she knows he cannot come until noon. It is a thousand times worse than standing by to see her die. I feel all her pain; it seems to pass through my heart as well as hers. Ah, me! what ruin, what havoc one man can make.'

Who knew that better than the girl whose heart had been crushed!

'I wish,' cried Lady Penrith, in desperation, 'it had never happened; and I wish that horrible, malicious Frenchwoman had staid at home. It was all malice, all spite. I am sure he loved my daughter, and he would have made her a good, true husband.'

'That I honestly believe,' said Agatha, and Lady Penrith was pleased with her fervor.

'I shall go to my room,' she returned, 'and I shall remain there until he is gone.'

'Lady Penrith,' asked Agatha, 'do you think there is no hope for Beatrice?'

'I am afraid not, and I do not think those who love her best could wish her to live. Her life without him would be a living death.'

'Like my own,' said Agatha to herself, 'like my own.'

Then Lady Penrith went away, and the school room doors were shut. He who had been life of her life, her lover, the lover of her heart, was coming, for the last time, and she should neither see nor hear him; it was bitterly hard.

The children were told their sister was very ill, and that the house must be kept very silent; they were not to go down to the dining-room, as usual, but to take luncheon with Miss Brooke in the school-room; children are always pleased with novelties, and this was one to them.

It was a beautiful day; there was morning on the sweet face of nature—the sky was blue, the sun bright and warm, the air was sweet and odorous, the birds singing, the lovely flowers holding up their heads to greet the sun; the bright, deep river was flashing in the light, the trees were like little green realms of sunlight and song.

All the thoughts, the interests and love of each member of that large household were centred in the room where Beatrice lay—the same room wherein she had shown the suit of pearls to Agatha, and had told her all about her happy love—lofty and bright, with large windows that overlooked the river and park; a room just suited to a beautiful young girl; furnished in light satin-wood, with hangings of pale blue silk and white lace; a carpet that looked like forget-me-nots covered with snow, a few choice flowers and favorite books, a few favorite engravings; and in them one read the character and tastes of the graceful girl whose heart had been so cruelly broken.

There was the ever fresh and beautiful engravings of 'Dante and Beatrice,' with the lovely upraised face; there was Scheffer's beautiful 'Christian Martyr,' the fair, virginal body floating on the dark stream; and on the wall, where the sunbeams fell warmest and brightest, was a copy of the world-renowned picture of 'Christ before Pilate,' a picture that Beatrice had always liked and admired. The light fell on the Divine Face, so full of love, so grave in its simple splendor, contrasting in its kingly dignity and Godlike meekness with the half-frightened, half-arrogant figure of Pilate.

'What is truth?' Pilate had asked, and as the once bright eyes of Beatrice Penrith lingered on the picture she sighed the same words over again to herself.

'What is truth?' She had not found it in the heart of man; she had not found it in love; she would find it in Heaven, where the light of that Divine Face would shine forever and forevermore.

She did not wish to live; the spring of her life was broken; earth had lost all its charm; neither love of parents nor friends could suffice for her, since she had tasted the sweetest and brightest of earthly loves. She had looked into the long stretch of years that people call life—into the future—and she saw in it nothing but the chill of desolation and despair. Rather death

—rather a green grave under the old trees, where he would come sometimes and feel sorry that his love had killed her—rather the grave for her body, and Heaven for her soul, than life with the never-ending pain of losing him. She had lain still, watching that Divine Face, with its promise of pardon, until in some measure the human love had grown weaker in her heart, until she thought more of Heaven than of earth, until she thought more of her lover's soul than his love.

Day after day, week after week, she had lain there thinking. As the line of the coast fades from the eyes of the traveller seaward bound, the lights die and the cliffs grow dim, so it was with her—the lights of the world, the line of life, the coast of time grew dim, and before her lay the great boundless sea of eternity.

Her simple, child-like faith shone out with the clear, bright beauty of a star on a dark night. She had always been what is called a good girl—had said her prayers, and had carefully refrained from anything she knew to be wrong, because she would not 'make God angry.' She had always hoped to go to Heaven; but now, as she lay with the receding tide of time beating in her ears, she thought more deeply still.

She hoped to go to Heaven, but she wished also that her lover might be there. She felt sure, in her simplicity, that even in Heaven she should feel pain over him if he were not there.

He must go. She dared not think of what she had read about torment for the wicked; he must not be classed among the wicked; she must see him, and tell him how willingly she would give her life for his if he would be sorry and try hard to go to Heaven. After all, time was short and eternity long; better to be with him for ever in Heaven than for a short time on earth. So she lay with her eyes fixed, first on the blue sky, then on the Divine Face on the picture, her thoughts bent on one thing—how she could persuade him to be good. Were they true, she wondered, all the things they had said of him—that he had betrayed the trust of the innocent; had spread ruin and devastation where he should have given happiness? He had been so bad, her father said, that he could not speak of his crimes.

Ah, well, many and many a poor sinner had knelt at those Divine feet. If he would not kneel there himself, she would

kneel for him ; and, well, after all, she loved him. Insensibly the nature of her love had changed. She no longer thought of him as her noble, handsome lover, her earl, but as of one whom she had lost in this world, but wanted to see in Heaven.

Her prayer was answered at last. She had said to her father, on the evening before, that she was growing weaker, and would like to see the earl while she could talk to him ; and it was then Lord Penrith telegraphed to him, and the earl came.

Lord Penrith met him in the great entrance hall. The earl held out his hand. Lord Penrith frowned darkly when he saw it.

' I touch the hands of men of honor,' he said, ' not such as yours. I will finish my reckoning with you when my daughter is at rest.

The words went like a barbed arrow through the heart of the unhappy man.

' For Heaven's sake spare me !' he cried. ' I have enough to bear. No one strikes a down-trodden man.'

Lord Penrith made no answer. When they reached the corridor he pointed to the room-door.

' My daughter lies dying there,' he said. ' If a murderer would see his victim, there you will find her.'

Lord Kelso's face was white and haggard with emotion.

' Will you not come with me ?' he asked.

' No,' replied Lord Penrith. ' I am afraid, if I saw her near you, I should do you deadly mischief—I could not help it. The nurse is there—I—go ! I cannot control myself. Go !'

He rapped gently at the door. It was opened by the nurse, who looked at him with quiet intelligence in her eyes.

' Can I see Miss Penrith now ?' he asked.

And the woman looked pityingly at the dark, handsome face, from which the light and pride had gone for evermore.

' Miss Penrith is expecting you,' said the nurse.

And then he heard a faint, sweet voice say :

' Come in.'

He had expected anger and reproach—he looked for accusation and tears, for hard words ; but no, a thousand times no ! A sweet face, with eyes full of longing, was turned to him—wistful eyes, so full of pain they pierced him ; two fragile, tender arms outstretched to him ; and a gentle voice said :

'Oh, my love! my love! Once again! Just once again!'  
 And, before he knew what he was doing, he was kneeling  
 before Beatrice, with her head pillowed on his breast.

The vices of our youth make lashes for our age.

As he knelt with that innocent face and dear head on his  
 breast, Vane, Lord Kelso, would have given his life to have un-  
 done his crimes.

## CHAPTER LXXII.

### THE VICTIM OF A MAN'S SINS.

**L**ORD KELSO tried to raise that pale, sweet face and  
 dry the raining tears, but she clung the more closely  
 to him. She had forgotten all they had said about his  
 wrong-doing in that hour—she remembered only how she loved  
 him. Until he died he never forgot the words she whispered  
 to him; they were sacred to him—no one else heard them; it  
 was the girl's loving farewell to her love. Then he laid her  
 head back upon the pillow, but she said:

'No, while you are with me, let my head rest here. It is for  
 the last time—oh, my dear love, for the last time!'

'You are very ill, my sweet Beatrice,' he said.

'Yes; I am going to die. I could not have lived without  
 you. You have been my life from the first moment I saw you.  
 Do you remember it?'

'Oh, Heaven, forgive me!' sobbed the unhappy man. Oh,  
 Beatrice, I never meant to give you one moment's sorrow. I  
 meant to make you so happy, and I have killed you!'

'I am happy to die,' she said; 'I could not live without you.  
 I have been much happier since I was ill; before that, I was  
 mad; all the air around me seemed like burning fire. I used  
 to go out into the woods where no one could see or hear me,  
 and cry out for you—stretch out my arms and cry to you. Ah,  
 my love, my love! nothing ever answered me but the rustling  
 of the boughs and the leaves. I used to throw my arms round

the rugged trunks of trees. I must not tell you all my misery ; all my madness none can know. The nights seemed to me as long as years ; the days—oh, Vane ! I tried to keep up.'

'My darling !' he murmured, with tears.

'I tried to talk and laugh, to make mamma happy, and then go to my room and pray Heaven to let me die. Oh, Vane ! the sharp anguish, the bitter misery, the pain in my heart was so great ; and now that is all over—I have but to die.'

'My darling !' he murmured again.

'Yes, your darling—always yours. Oh, Vane ! I was so thankful when they said that I must die—when this peace and quiet and rest came to me and I had no longer to keep up appearances ; when I could lie and sob my heart away. Is it true, dear love, are all the terrible tales they tell of you true ?'

He would have given his life to have answered 'no,' to have bidden that loving, innocent child look up and believe him, to have kissed the sweet face and tell her it was a slander and a lie.

Who says wrong-doing is not punished, even in this world ? Lord Kelso knew.

'My darling, it is all true,' he replied, with bowed head and trembling lips. 'I humble myself before Heaven and before you ; it is all true ; but let me add this—in those, the wicked days of my youth and folly, I did not know you.'

'Poor Vane !' she said, gently. 'I am sorry it is all true.' She laid one hand gently round his neck, until his dark, troubled face touched hers. 'I am sorry,' she repeated, 'most of all for your sake. I would sooner die now and be with you forever in Heaven. I shall be with you, shall I not ? No one else has such a claim as mine. I shall have died for you.'

He remembered another face fair as an angel's, and he thought of the white lily he had beaten to the ground. But no one had died for him, and he could safely say, 'No, no one had such a claim.'

She smiled.

'Then I am more content,' she replied. 'I would sooner lose my hold on you here and have you for ever hereafter.'

He could only cry out that she was his darling, and that he would give his life for hers.

'I wish,' she said, dreamily, 'that no one had ever told ; we should have been happy. I need never have known it. You

would have been kind to me, and I am sure you are good now. I sent for you when they said I must die, because I wanted to see you. I am dying because my heart is broken ; not crushed and aching, but broken, and I know, who know you so well, how you will grieve after me. I know you will ; whatever you may have done, you have always loved me. You will never show it to the world, but you will suffer. I want to make my memory pleasing to you, and full of hope. I want you, oh, my darling, to pledge yourself to me again, and to promise you will come to me in Heaven. People say they do not know what Heaven is like ; but I know how good God is, and He will let us be together if you will try to come. Will you ?'

He could not speak, he could only moan out his passionate despair.

'Then, instead of thinking of me as a poor, pale-faced girl—dying—you will think of me as a radiant Beatrice—like that,' she added, pointing to the picture ; 'always watching, and waiting, and praying for you. Forget all about my illness and death. Go from the happy Beatrice, whom you left so short a time since, to the happy Beatrice waiting for you—waiting for you where the gates stand ajar. I want to speak to you, Vane ; it is the last time—the very last time. Closer, dear, let me feel your face. They told me you had been a wicked man, and you say it is true,' she continued, one little hand caressing the troubled face. 'My darling, do you know that a wicked man *cannot* go to Heaven ? Heaven hates all wickedness and sin. I want you to come to Heaven—waiting for you there, time will cease to be. But you must be good. Oh, my beautiful love, whom I have lost on earth, will you try, will you be good, will you come to me ?'

'I will try,' he said, gently.

'It will not be difficult, Vane,' she said. 'First and foremost, you must be sorry for all these faults and sins of yours.'

'Heaven knows, my dear, I am sorry for them,' he replied, 'with all my heart.'

Her pale face brightened.

'Are you really sorry ? I am so glad.'

'I do not want to make excuses for myself,' he replied, 'but no one ever taught me to be good ; I was spoiled from the time I lay in my cradle.'

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'Poor Vane!' she said, with beautiful compassion and tenderness. 'Men do not know these things, but Heaven does.'

'I will tell you quite honestly, Beatrice,' he said, 'that the highest law I have followed has been always my own pleasure.'

'Poor Vane!' she repeated, with infinite gentleness.

'And,' he cried, 'I am a miserable sinner—a most miserable sinner. But I will do better, and I will live so that I may come to you again.'

She laid her face on his, and there was infinite relief in the sigh she gave.

'Oh, my earl! my earl!' she said—'my beautiful love! the only love I have ever had. Come to me, my darling, in another world—I who have lost you in this. Oh, Vane, my love! ought I to have said all these things to you? They were all so angry with you, and perhaps—I cannot tell—perhaps I should not have kissed and caressed you. Should I have reproached you? But how could I, when I loved you so well?'

'My darling, you have been a very angel of pity and mercy to me,' he cried—'you have done for me what no one else could have done.'

Unutterable love shone in the sweet face she raised to his.

'You are going to be good, just as I wish you,' she said; 'you will say your prayers, just as little children do, and you will be good to the poor, and Vane—Vane—'

'What, my darling?' he whispered.

'Papa says you have broken the heart of more than one girl; you will remember me, how I have suffered, if ever the temptation comes to you to break another.'

'Look,' she continued, 'at that face in the picture; see how the sunlight touches it; the face is so grave, so divine, yet full of pity and mercy; that is the same face that will shine on us in Heaven.'

They heard impatient footsteps in the corridor outside, and the girl's face grew whiter.

'That is papa; he thinks you have been long enough with me. Oh, Vane! this is all the sorrow death held, bidding you farewell.'

In a passion of tears that he could not repress, he flung himself again on his knees; he had risen at the sound of those footsteps, and had unclasped her tender arms from his neck.

'Will you forgive me, Beatrice?' he said.



'Yes, with all my heart. I will tell you something, Vane. I should not say it but that I am going to die. I would rather have loved you, loved you unhappily and die for you, than have been happy even with any one else. Bend your face down to me, let me look at it for the last time. Oh, beautiful face, good-by! Vane, I wish you would kiss me, and I wish that I could die with your lips on mine.'

He bent down to kiss her. Once more he touched the sweet, innocent lips that had known no other kiss. He caught the faint breath, the feeble sigh; at first he thought she was dead. The nurse came hastily forward, and he went away.

If any man or woman lives foolish enough to think that wrong-doing is not punished in this world, they should have looked into the heart of that unhappy man.

Lord Penrith was waiting in the corridor.

'I will see you safely from the house,' he said.

'Lord Penrith,' cried the earl, 'your daughter, the sweetest, truest, and purest soul on earth, has forgiven me. Can you not do the same?'

'No!' he cried, 'and I never will! The world is wide; you might surely have found some one less dear, less precious than my daughter. Go, and pray Heaven I may never see your face again.'

He went, trembling with suffered dread; his nerves had been terribly strained; he had a grief more than words could tell; his brain seemed to be on fire; his head was aching with almost intolerable anguish; his eyes were blinded with tears.

'Drive back to the station,' he said to the coachman; 'you need not wait for me.'

He felt that, even if he wandered in the grounds and the woods all night, he could not leave the spot where Beatrice lay dying.

He went down the broad flight of marble steps; he remembered the day when she stood there to welcome him to Penrith; he remembered the light in her eyes, the roses in her hair, and now she lay stricken unto death, all for him. She was the innocent victim of his sins. He thought of all the sacrifices he had ever read of. He thought of Abraham's son, his bosom bared to the knife; he thought of Jephtha's daughter; but surely there was never sacrifice like unto this.

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The brow of Cain was branded because his hand was wet with his brother's blood. How many lost souls weighed on his mind? How should he have been handled if justice had been done to him? The sun had set, no light lingered lovingly on flower or tree; there was a chill in the night air, a wail in the wind that made his blood run cold.

He wandered through the grounds. He was a strong man, but he felt that if he could not weep out some of the bitter anguish that filled his heart, he should die.

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### CHAPTER LXXIII.

'ANGEL OF MY LIFE, COME BACK TO ME!'

**A**NYWHERE, out of the sight of the house where she lay whom his love had brought to this terrible point; he felt as though at one bound he could have fled from there to the uttermost end of the earth, yet he could not leave the spot; he must watch the light from her windows—he must see if it disappeared, and if so he should know what had happened. The handsome earl, whom all women had loved—the rich earl, whom all men had envied—was the most miserable man living on earth.

Memory whipped him with scorpion whips. There was another face fairer than even that of Beatrice Penrith, the face of a woman, fair as an angel, pure and innocent as a child; to his excited fancy the two were almost one. This fairer face had long vanished from him; it slept, he firmly believed, under the waters of Lake Lucerne. If he had married Agatha Brooke this tragedy would never have happened, and his thoughts went with a bitter curse to Valerie d'Envers who had worked him this deadly ill.

If he had married Agatha! How small, and paltry, and trifling all the reasons seemed to be that he had once thought all sufficient! For those who had flirted with him—who had

met him half-way in this terrible game of flirtation, he felt no remorse, no pity; but the very life's blood of those two innocent girls was on his hands. How like they were in simplicity, in tenderness of heart, in child-like faith!—how earnestly they both believed in being good and seeking for Heaven!

How earnestly they both believed in what he had once thought to be trifles, but which he found now were the most solemn things in life. There came back to his mind the old church with its great shady trees, the old-fashioned porch, the stained glass window in the east—where the fair form of the Christian virgin Agatha shone, with the halo of gold around it—with the wind that wailed through the trees; he could hear the grand chant of the fair Agatha; he could hear the sweet, clear voice; he could see the child-like face that had looked at him with such wonder when he said there was more than one Delilah. Where was she? Alas! for his vile and miserable sin. What answer could he make to the Great Judge, when the souls—the lives—of those two innocent girls had to be accounted for?

And as, unable to bear the weight of his misery, unable to endure the sting of conscience, he flung himself down on his knees, the prayer of the publican rose to his lips:

'Oh, God! be merciful to me a sinner.'

The handsome earl, whose eyes had allured so many hearts away—the wealthy earl, whose riches no man had counted—cried out in utter, abject sorrow for the wrong he had done. He knelt there in the midst of the dead leaves and the dry grass, and he cried aloud for pity and for comfort.

He knew then, in that supreme hour of his life, that he loved Agatha best, that the great love of his heart and life had gone to her, and that he had loved Beatrice because she was so much like the girl who had believed herself to be his wife. That was no excuse—it did not undo the wrong, but it was true that the likeness he saw in the character of Beatrice to that of Agatha was the one great reason why he had been so attracted by her.

And his love had slain her, as it had slain Agatha before her! Ah! if he could see her!—the one true faithful love of his heart—if he could see her! and then the pain, the desolation in his heart grew so great that his pride all melted, and he wept aloud.

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He knelt among the dead leaves, the dry grass and wept aloud. There are tears and tears, but surely some of them form jewels in Heaven. He heard a rustling among the dead leaves, a sound as if something brushing the long grass; he knew that something was advancing slowly towards him; he could not at first check his sobs or his tears; but he knew that the figure had stopped just before him, and he heard a faint, low cry of fear and dismay.

There was something familiar in the cry—something familiar in the unseen presence. He raised his face; at first he saw a long blue dress and a halo of golden hair, then a pale, sweet face seemed to grow out of the shadows—a sweet pale face, with a scared, frightened expression, blue eyes into which sudden fear leaped—a sweet red mouth parted as though with surprise, and the faint sound died on the lips.

For the first few minutes he was paralysed with fear, then he stretched out his hands to her.

'Agatha!' he cried. 'Great Heaven! Can it be you?'

No other face on earth was so sweet—no voice so tender—no heart so true—no love so great—no pity so nearly Divine!

'Agatha!' he repeated. 'Agatha!'

She drew nearer to him, and it seemed to him that she did not touch the ground, but floated to him over the dry grass—or—and he could have cried aloud at the thought—was this the Agatha from the stained-glass window?—the Christian virgin who would rather die than offend God?—come to reproach him? A shudder of cold and fear came over him.

'It is I, Vane, be not afraid,' she said.

'Agatha!' he repeated. 'Ah, Heaven send that this be no fancy, Agatha!'

She drew nearer, until he clasped the folds of the blue dress in his hands.

'How shall I know that it is really you?' he cried. 'I am mad with grief and shame. Have you risen from the dead?'

'I am living and well,' she replied. 'I am no spirit. Touch my hands; they are warm with life—not cold in death.'

He touched them while the tears fell from his eyes and his lips quivered.

'Ah, they are warm and living enough. Kind, sweet hands

they were—gentle, loving hands that ministered to me. Oh, Agatha, how shall I look at you? What shall I say to you.'

'Did you mean to do me that cruel wrong?' she asked, gently.

## CHAPTER LXXIV.

## THE EARL'S ATONEMENT.

'I WILL not win your pardon, even by a lie,' he answered. 'Yes, at first I did mean it. You were only a simple country girl; but more beautiful than I had ever seen, and I thought—ah, well! I dare not tell you what I thought; but I loved you. At first only a mild, sweet, mad fancy. I had many such before, but I believed that it was sweeter, deeper, and more lasting. I confess all my shame and sorrow to you, though your eyes smite me with pain. I meant to take you away with me; but just then, I did not think to make you my wife. I deceived you. Yet, except yourself, I think there was no other girl in the world who would have believed in that marriage. You did, Agatha. I know it.'

'I did,' she said. 'I believed in it. Now I cannot think how I was so mad or so blind; but it was real to me.'

'I knew it. And then, Agatha, when we had been away only a few days, I found that I really loved you; I found that my heart, and soul, and life were engrossed in you, and I would have given the whole world to have undone what I had done. I swear to you that I loved you so well I would have given my life to have undone the wrong; and I swear to you that I lived in an agony of fear that you should ever know what I had done. I staid so long in Switzerland, always hoping that I could invent some excuse for going through a legal form of marriage with you. My life is all stained with sin—I do not deny that; but I repeat that I longed to make you my wife; that you are the only woman whom I have truly loved or wished to marry. But for that vile woman's

deed—that accursed woman who thrust herself between us, you would have been my wife, and this horror would never have happened. But tell me, Agatha, what brings you here? Oh, my lost darling, my lost love! stay here with me awhile, and tell me—what brings you here?’

She sat down on the fallen trunk of a tree, with the dead leaves rustling around her, and he knelt at her feet while she told him all that had happened to her since the sunlit morning when he had left her, as they both thought, for a few short hours—the whole long history; of the kindness of the noble French lady, the tragedy of the unhappy Phillis Norman, of the way in which fate or Providence had brought her to Penrith Castle. She spared neither him nor herself the details, and she lingered long over the story of Beatrice.

Her voice was very low and gentle, but to him it was as clear and terrible as the voice of an accusing angel.

‘Of all the cruel deeds of your life, Vane,’ she said, ‘and some of them have been very cruel—this is the worst. That innocent, loving girl—what harm had she done?’

‘None. I loved her because she was so like you. In her face there was a look of innocent wonder and sweet girlish surprise, just such a look as you wear, and it was for that I loved her. Then I believed you to be dead, and I mourned for you as few men mourn even for the wives they love. I meant to make her happy, Agatha. Be just to me; it is the punishment of my sin, no doubt, but it was not my fault that my enemy followed me and wreaked her wicked vengeance on that innocent head. If she dies, it will be Valerie who has slain her, not I. I would have been good, and kind, and true to her. Oh, Agatha, angel of my life, come back to me! You wake into life all that was best in me; come back to me, and teach me the way to Heaven. Heaven knows that if any one had taught me or trained me when I was young, I should have been a different man. Will you forgive me, Agatha darling? I humble myself before you—I kneel before you, and ask your pardon as the highest boon that Heaven can grant me.’

‘You did me a cruel wrong, Vane.’

‘I did; but you yourself have taught me the greater the sin the greater the repentance—the greater need for mercy. Forgive me, Agatha, even as you ask forgiveness yourself

And for all answer she laid her hands once more in his. They were silent for some time, and then the earl, in a low voice, said :

'You will let me atone for you, Agatha, for the wrong I did you—you will be my wife?'

'I have not thought of that,' she replied, simply.

'In justice to yourself and to me,' he said. 'Oh, my darling, I deceived you once, trust me now. I will spend the remainder of my life in trying to atone to you for the wrong.'

'I cannot say. Yes, I own that it is rightful restitution—nothing more. You are bound to give me back the fair name of which you robbed me. I admit that, but the question must stand. While Beatrice lives I must remain with her; if she dies, I do not think there will be much hope left for either of us; if she lives, I will think and decide.'

'Will she live, do you think?' he asked.

'I have never thought her in such danger as others have done. And now, Vane,' she continued, 'we must part. I shall stay at Penrith Castle. In six months' time, if you wish, you can write to me here, and I will give you my decision.'

'Heaven grant that it may be "yes,"' he cried.

'Heaven grant that it may be for the best,' she added.

'Agatha,' he asked, 'will you write and tell me how Beatrice is? It will ease my heart and mind so much.'

'I will write to you for that purpose,' she replied, 'but not for any other;' and he thanked her.

Beatrice Penrith did not die. The visit, which every one thought was the last of her life, proved to be the turning point of her illness. The earl had left her with, as he thought, the last breath almost on her lips. When she came to herself again, it was with a sense of calm and rest to which she had long been a stranger. It very often happens that a strong love dies under the influence of a long illness; such was the case with her. That she loved him well enough to die for him, was true; she had expended what she thought to be her last breath and her last degree of strength in trying to do him good. He had taken the deadliest sting of pain from her heart, and he had promised all she asked. For the first time for many long months her heart was at rest, and she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. When she awoke she was better, and a flutter of hope went

through the whole household. The doctors said there was a chance.

'Instead of killing her,' said Lord Penrith to his wife, 'I believe the visit of that man has done her good.'

They took such care of this new germ of life that she recovered—never to be the same bright, happy girl again, never to know unclouded happiness, but to save the man whom she loved so much from the deepest pain life could hold for him.

It was a long, lingering illness, but it killed the passionate love, as pain and weariness of life often do. While it lasted Agatha was a most loving and constant nurse; she spent every spare moment with Beatrice—she soothed, calmed and counselled her; to the end of her life Beatrice Penrith remembered the lessons she learned during that time of convalescence. When she came back to life and health she was no longer a bright, careless girl—she was a thoughtful woman, with a heart full of pity for all who have to suffer.

When she was able to travel she went with her parents to Italy; she was always like one given back from death; she had been so sure of dying; and every one else had been so sure; she had never thought it possible she could recover; she had been convinced that her heart was broken, but the young can suffer much, and it takes much to kill.

She was never quite the same; she had lost the bright spirits and light heart—she had lost the sunshine from her eyes and from her laugh; but some of the noblest souls have passed through the furnace of pain.

When the six months had ended the earl wrote, and Agatha answered "Yes." It was a duty he owed her, she said, and she would accept the only reparation he could make her.

"Not yet," she told him. She should wait until the return of the Penriths before she made any change in her life. She had been left in charge of the children, and she must fulfil her trust.

He grew jealous and fearful. It seemed to him that she thought more of reparation than of love. She spoke and wrote only of the atonement he owed to her, and which he was bound to make; but in those days she said nothing to him of love.

To Agatha the bare idea of having to tell her story to Lady Penrith was most painful, but she had to do it. She waited



until that lady returned with her husband and Beatrice—Beatrice well, but not strong.

Lady Penrith's wonder and pain were great. Agatha left her to tell as much of the story as she liked to Beatrice, but Lady Penrith said she should not mention it yet, and she could only hope that for some years, at least, they would not meet. It was some days before Lady Penrith could forget her surprise.

There was great dismay at the castle when it was known that Miss Brooke was leaving, she was so beloved by the whole household ; but she noticed one thing, that Lord Penrith never smiled upon her after he knew her story.

They were married in London, very quietly, and without any display ; only two witnesses were present, distant relatives of the earl's, and no mention was made of the marriage, except in one or two papers. If ever man made ample reparation, it was Vane, Lord Kelso. The first thing he did was to take his beautiful wife home to Whitecroft.

There are things that will hardly bear the telling, this was one—what Lady Kelso felt when she saw the old church again—when she looked once more on the grand eastern window her mother had loved—when she saw the fair face of the saint shining on her—when she heard once more the grand roll of the organ—when she looked once more at the grave where her young mother slept, and the pretty village that had been her home.

It was a sight to see the people clinging and weeping around her, so pleased once more to see the kindly beautiful face that had been to them as the face of an angel. No words could tell the joy of old Joan. To think that her beautiful mistress was a countess, 'higher than my Lady Ruthven !'

'You told us you were married,' she said ; but, oh, Miss Agatha, you should have told us to whom ! We have wearied sore after you.'

David Brooke, absent as ever, did not express much surprise.

'I thought you would come back some day, my dear,' he said. 'I knew that your mother's daughter could not go far wrong ; but I am astonished that you have married an earl !'

Lord Kelso made himself everything that was most amiable. On Joan he settled an annuity that made her in the eyes of the village a rich woman. He made friends with the doctor.

'Will you forgive me,' he said, 'for running away with your daughter? I loved her so much—and there were circumstances I cannot explain. We have been selfish to remain away so long; but you see I have brought her safely back.'

The doctor was made happy for life. He would not leave Whitecroft, because his wife was buried there, but he accepted the handsome income that the earl settled upon him, which enabled him to give up his profession and devote himself to the studies he loved. He would not leave his house, although the earl urged him to do so. Agatha was rather pleased; she loved the little parlor, and she loved the garden gate where Joan had seen her talking to Sir Vane.

Perhaps the most surprised was Lady Anne Ruthven. Lord Kelso took his wife to see her, and her surprise was almost ludicrous. She was honestly pleased. It had turned out so much better than she had ever dared to hope. Agatha, Countess of Kelso, had no truer friends than Doctor Ruthven and his wife, Lady Anne.

What wonders the earl did in that village—every man, woman and child was the better for his coming into it. He built model cottages at a low rental; he built new schools, a pretty little hospital, a library, and everything was called after his wife. The Agatha alms-houses are considered the best in England.

Then he took his wife to see Madam de Tiernay, who was delighted to welcome her. The count raved for a few days in the most romantic fashion, then declared that Lord Kelso was the finest man he had ever met, and swore eternal friendship with him.

In Paris they heard that Mrs. Norman was dead; and that fate had avenged her, for her husband had married again. His second wife was a beautiful young girl, one of the greatest flirts in Paris, who delighted in driving him to the verge of madness by jealousy—then laughing in his face.

'The mills of God grind slowly,  
Though they grind exceeding small.'

There also they heard of the brilliant marriage of Mademoiselle d'Envers to the Duc d'Albe. True, he was past eighty; he had lost all his hair and all his teeth, he was crippled and

decrepit; but he was one of the wealthiest peers in France, and madly in love with Valerie's beautiful face.

'That explains why she did not interrupt our wedding, Agatha,' said the earl. 'Every moment I expected to see her.'

But Agatha, looking into his dark, handsome face, so full of love, only murmurs a few words of pity—nothing more. She knows that Madame la Duchess d'Albe will work out her own punishment in time.

It was not the least of Lady Kelso's pleasures to go to the Hospital of St. John, and make there a munificent return of all the charity that had been shown to her. And then the earl and countess returned home.

Lady Kelso never became a queen of fashion; she was never presented at court, and she never was queen of a London season; but no woman in England was more beloved or admired. She was famous for her charities; for her pious, gentle life; for her devotion to her husband and children; for her goodness to the poor. Everyone knew that there had been some story in her life; but no one ever suspected the truth.

Three years after their marriage, they heard good news from Beatrice Penrith. She had married Gerald Leigh, who was at the head of his profession.

When Lord Kelso read the news he sighed, then turned to his wife and kissed her sweet face. She held her little son in her arms, and he kissed the child softly.

Long years afterward he met Lady Leigh, a grave, beautiful woman, with a story in her face that he had written there. They were very silent when they met, each remembering the last parting. They said but little when they did speak, and Lady Leigh avoided meeting him, whenever it was possible, although she was now a happy wife and a happy mother.

'So the story ends; but there is a moral. Do not believe, you who read, that a man can do wrong with impunity—that he can lead an evil life, and then enjoy this life as though he had led a good one.

Agatha had not sinned—she had been foolishly credulous, but she had not done wrong wilfully. The innocent must suffer with the guilty. She was happy, but she could have been happier. She did her best to forget, but there were times when all these memories rushed over her, and then happier women could be found than the Countess of Kelso.

The earl has everything that this world can give—a beautiful devoted wife, beautiful, loving children, boundless wealth, perfect health, honour, fame and every good gift ; yet he looks sad at times. He hears that Lady G——'s daughters, fine, handsome girls though they are, are going all wrong, because they have no mother to train, or guard, or take care of them. It comes home to him then, and keeps his sins ever before his eyes. That is the inner life ; outwardly they are happy, prosperous, and beloved, and the world lays its fairest flowers at the foot of one who had trodden on sharp thorns before she reached the land of roses.

THE END.

