

CRUEL

AS

THE GRAVE;

The Secret of Dunraven Castle.

BY ANNIE ASHMORE,
Author of "Faithful Margaret," Etc. Etc.

CHAPTER XVII.—(Continued.)

The secretary, leaning heavily on the back of a chair, heard this dismissal with eyes lowered, and hands clenched by his sides.

For a long minute after Lord Inchape had finished there was a silence, while Silcomore struggled for strength to utter wild protest.

He might have injured Lady Inchape, who had never liked nor trusted him; but oh! he had been loyal to Lady Ulva?

How gladly he had consecrated his scholarship to her use; how patiently he had guided her steps through the secret labyrinths of knowledge. Had she not been given to him by her proud father to his pupil in lonely Sleat na-Vreken? and if she grew from girlhood gently into womanhood, and drew her tutor's unwitting heart after her, until it had no pulse that did not beat for her, ah! who was to blame?

And now—who loved her as he loved her; poor, shamed, ruined, old John Silcombe? For he loved without ever having presumed to hope for possession—loved for the simple rapture of loving her! And now they spoke of sending him away—of barring him from the presence that made life endurable!

"I deserve death perhaps," he cried, wildly, "but I have got my death-blow; I shall not live long to bear my shame; let me live out my poor days near you, then, my lord; do not banish me altogether!"

He fell at Lord Inchape's feet in an agony of supplication; for a moment his haggard face looked up towards my lord's with straining eyes, then he sank lower still, lay prostrate on the carpet—was as pale, and the red blood oozed from his lips.

Poor, worn, midnight student!

The sweet passion which is due at twenty-one, had come upon him at sixty—too late! too late!

CHAPTER XVIII.

"I SHALL NOT FAIL YOU."

That very afternoon, in spite of Mrs. Dellamore's most anxious precautions, Col. Accrington succeeded in obtaining an interview with Loveday, and one without witnesses.

So determined had he been to catch the young lad, alone there is little doubt that he had availed himself of the services of spies, else how could he have guessed that she was sauntering by herself in a part of her mother's grounds far enough from the house to suit his purpose perfectly?

Loveday had just parted from Auberon at the Pavilion gate, and, too happy to go in at once, she had extended her stroll until she found herself at the back wall, where the sun shone warmly, and the lime trees shut out the chill autumn wind.

Here she paced to and fro for a half-hour or so, enjoying the warmth, the solitude, and her radiant thoughts; and little dreaming of the dark, inscrutable face which soon approached among the trees, and watched her covetously.

She held a tiny pot-dog in her muff, its pretty little snow-white head peering out all ready to respond to its mistress' whispered confidences; her first suspicion of an intruder was caused by the tiny creature's suddenly quivering-eared alertness and eager excitement. She looked round to see Col. Accrington approaching her, hat in hand, an expression of iron resolution on his unweaving face.

Now Loveday had learned enough about this fierce lover of hers since that day of adventure, to turn all her gentle heart to stone as far as he was concerned; the day of his magnetic power over her was gone.

Edgar Arden, dreading the machinations of such an unscrupulous man, had at length decided to arm the innocent girl against his insidious influence, with a knowledge of his true character; he had therefore written a simple statement that Col. Accrington deserved no regard from her or any honorable person, as he was even at his present time guilty of a wrong toward Lord Inchape which he could repair, yet would not.

Edgar forwarded this brief note to Mrs. Dellamore, inviting her to make use of it on her daughter's behalf as she saw fit, but requesting the ladies to confine the knowledge he had given them to themselves.

Mrs. Dellamore had handed the note to Loveday that very morning, for the first time uttering all her own distrust and indignation against the two diplomatic attachés.

Imagine then the emotions of timid, girlish Loveday, when all at once her terrible lover faced her in that lonely place!

He was silent, brooding, bitterly over the dismay and displeasure he read in her eyes, and waiting for her first words to show him how to manage the conference.

She soon collected herself, indignation giving her courage, and said, coldly, "I must bid you good-morning, sir; I am on my way home," and would have left him with a formal bow, but he placed himself at her side, saying, firmly:

"Miss Dellamore, I am forced to intrude upon you thus or never see you alone; forgive me, then; my despairing love is stronger than I—"

She stopped at that, crimsoning, indignant, and shocked at his audacity.

"How dare you persist in speaking to me upon that subject?" cried she; "you know well that I—that Mr. Cray—"

"Have been tied to each other by your respective parents—yes, Miss Dellamore, I know that," retorted Accrington, disdainfully. "But have your own hearts sealed the compact? How long is it since Auberon Cray's affection for his life-long playmate was that of a brother? A week ago he saw only Lady Merion Rae through love's golden glamour; and you—what need have you of half a heart, while mine a man's heart is bound to you by an eternal love?"

"I am satisfied with Auberon's, and have no desire to exchange it for yours," said the young girl, proudly.

"Ah, the sweet soul; you little know your own needs!" exclaimed the Colonel in the low, fervent tones he had so often subjugated, proud spirits with before. "It is no crude, boorish liking which will satisfy a nature like yours; no dreaming mystic can long retain your warm young living love!"

"Give yourself to me; I am strong and patient, and to win is life—to lose, death to me. I can teach you how to love me, and I know how to make my tender

darling happy as an angel in heaven—"

She checked his impassioned speech by a gesture of hot repulsion.

"You sneer at Auberon Cray's youth and genius," said she, impetuously, while her eyes flashed wrath and scorn upon the offender; "but how will your past life compare with his? Is it as crystal pure? Have you as little need of concealments? Thanks, no, I prefer to marry a man whose life has been as open and honorable as my own to marrying Richard Accrington with his memories."

Accrington wasghastly; the stroke had gone, and the blood in his veins had stopped in his indurated heart. The woman he madly loved knew all—knew and despised him; but what could she know? perhaps nothing but vague report.

"Who has dared to sully your innocent mind with slanders of my past?" demanded he with a show of righteous wrath. "Who could have had the bad heart to do it?"

"Can you disprove these slanders?" said Loveday scornfully.

He believed that she had learned nothing definite, and said mournfully:

"As! Miss Dellamore, what man's past life is fit for a maiden's scanning? We look to womanhood to redress us from our errors, and true love gives us the future in which to make due reparation."

"I will have no lover whose record is too shameful for me to read," cried Loveday fierily; then she fastened her indignant gaze upon him and said, "What is the fidelity of my messenger, when I have given him no needlessly?"

"Why do you speak of reparation? have you ever heard of the wrong you did Lord Inchape? and you ask me to love a man like that?"

Accrington started back with a shuddering. "That ends the matter," said he harshly: "you, too, decline to grant Miss Dellamore's prayer. Farewell!"

He was actually going, thought Loveday, and once more all her hopes were vanishing away; she could not but recall the wily schemer, just as he had intended.

"You may have reasons for such a request; at least let me hear them," said she.

"I have, but I fear that they will have little weight with Miss Dellamore," retorted he bitterly. "My own safety depends upon the fidelity of my messenger, when I have given him no needlessly?"

"I will plod no more. You were not in earnest, neither was I. Let us consider the whole matter a jest."

"I cannot—I dare not!" cried she in great distress. "I should be wretched forever if I were to abandon Lord Inchape, now that you make it depend on me whether you will do him justice or not. Is there no other way?"

"That way or none!" said Accrington, sternly. "Am I a dog to be treated with open distrust at the same time that you are ready to accept such a terrible sacrifice from me? Enough; my safety requires some precaution, and in the whole world you are the only being to whom I feel inclined to trust it."

"I will come," faltered Loveday, trembling.

He drew a long breath of intense relief. "Thank you!" said he earnestly. "I shall be at the gate by nine o'clock to-night with the paper, which you will not deliver until to-morrow morning. I must be far away then."

He gazed sadly in the sweet, troubled face before him; his voice softened and sank. "I shall not fall you, Loveday, even though I am destroying my life at your bidding; but I will fall you, knowing that you were waiting for me yonder alone, and that for the last time we two shall share a secret between us!"

He left her at last; left her overwhelmed with apprehension and doubt. It was so very hard to believe in him after the day at Silverstream!

At this point in his half-delirious thoughts, Accrington started from his rigid attitude with new hope in his eyes; there was one chance for him yet.

She had taken the opportunity of his stupefaction to hurry away, only too happy to escape him before worse befell; but thoughts glances swift as light through the brain, and Accrington's reverie had not been long enough to cover a retreat of more than a score of steps. He caught her and barred the way before she was out of the sheltered walk; she saw a wonderful change on his face; such grief and humility arrested her in spite of herself.

"If I should repair this wrong, you reproach me with, what then?" he asked.

Loveday felt her heart stand still.

Oh, if he only would do that! The vision of Lord Inchape, worn with a mysterious grief, desolate in his grandeur and solitary in his prime, passed before her. Did this man hold the key that locked life? And was it possible that he might be induced to restore the happiness which had been lost so long?

"Oh, Colonel Accrington, if you will do that, how I shall thank and honor you!" she said, with deep emotion.

"But what if it cost me name and fame and drove me forever from my native land?"

"The greater the sacrifice, the more worthy the reparation. Oh, sir! can you hesitate one moment?"

"Miss Dellamore, you can win the sacrifice from me, and you alone."

She recoiled in wild dismay.

"No—oh, in pity, no!" she moaned. "Do not thrust the responsibility upon me. What have I to do with it?"

"Sweetest love, I will have my heart like my life too, and mold it as you will. Is it home and honor or exile or the world's reprobation?"

"Right, Colonel Accrington, though the heavens should fall."

"And you will award me this little hand which strips me of the best prizes of a busy life?"

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