

about a month; and he hopes that you will not think it necessary to delay until then, the preparations for your wedding. Here is the letter."

She took it mechanically. Not that she wished to read it—oh, no! no! what could the tender, loving, trusting words be to her now? What could they bring her but remorse and pain? But all the same she took it, to gain time.

Slowly she read it through. So joyful, so hopeful, so unsuspecting of any wrong, so loving to her; it pierced her to the heart.

She laid it down with a little groan of remorse and raised her eyes to find her father's fixed upon her. In an instant she read in them that a portion of her secret was known, and, on the impulse of the moment, she spoke out:

"Papa, it is impossible! You will forgive me; I did not know my own heart. I was but a child; I cannot marry Frank!"

She had dared it—she had taken the plunge. Mr. Lisle drew a long, deep breath.

"She has more spirit than I supposed," he thought; "I shall have to recognize a rival to Frank, after all."

A loud, he said, coldly, and with a stern displeasure, beneath which she shrank and trembled visibly:

"And this explains the scene of last night, I suppose, to which I would have spared you any allusion, when you fainted away, unable to control your unmaidenly affection for a stranger, even in your father's presence; you, a betrothed bride! For shame, Dorothy, for shame! What is this man to you? Tell me the truth!"

The truth! It trembled on her very lips:

"He is my husband."

Had the tone of the questioner been less harsh she would have spoken, but now her tongue seemed tied.

Receiving no answer Mr. Lisle went on impatiently:

"You think you are in love with him of course. Pray, has he said anything of love or marriage to you? If he has, without my consent, he is a scoundrel!"

But she fired at that.

"You wrong him, papa, you wrong him! Yes, he does love me and has told me so. What was there wrong in that? You were not angry, I remember, when Frank spoke of his love, although then I was little better than a baby!"

The flushed cheek, the panting bosom, the flashing, fiery eyes showed him that she was terribly in earnest. "This is something different to her love for Frank," he thought, and so he condescended to reason with her.

"If you were but a baby, you were free," he said, severely; "please to remember that."

"But Cyril was not to know but I was so still," she answered quickly, and with unabated fire and spirit in her absent lover's defence. "What did he know of Frank? I look younger than I really am, he thought me a mere child; and who would expect to find a child engaged in marriage before she was old or wise enough to understand herself? I tell you, papa," she went on with increasing excitement, "that, though Frank never meant it, he did me a wrong, in taking advantage of my ignorance to win from me a promise which my heart does not indorse, and I can never, never fulfill."

She stood before him now pale and half-defiant, evidently ready to fight to the last grasp. Her spirit and determination astonished him; he had no key to the mystery of that desperation from which, together with her love, they sprang.

But he did not for a moment yield. Her newborn passion was more real than he had dreamed, but he was none the less resolved for that to strangle it in its birth. What was this girlish fancy of a day, compared to the bond that duty, calm affection, honor, even time itself had so long sanctified?

He was shrewd enough to guess, however, that she would be less warm in her own defense than in her lover's, and he changed his tactics accordingly.

"Sit down again," he said, quietly, "and control yourself. The time has come for a serious question between you and me."

She obeyed, awed and chilled by his calmness and wondering timidly what she was about to hear. Before either could utter another word, however, the door-bell rang violently, and next minute a messenger entered with a telegram.

Mr. Lisle took it hurriedly, his life was quiet and uneventful, and a little thing disturbed it. Dolly sat gazing with beating heart. "Could it be from Cyril?"

No. Her father read it through and dismissed the messenger, then turned to her with a stern, impressive air. "This comes from Frank," he said.

"From Frank!" The blood surged up from her heart to her face, and made a roaring in her ears that deafened her. "Frank near enough home to telegraph, and Cyril away! What was to become of her? Suddenly she became aware of her father's voice again.

"He will be here in a week, instead of a month, and he comes full of love and trust, little dreaming of your treachery. He is in Boston, but as soon as the necessary business of the ship is dispatched he will be here. Say, Dorothy, shall he find an honorable woman, faithful and true, like himself, to her given word, or a false, and immodest girl, who throws away the love of a tried

heart, to gratify a shameful fancy for a stranger? I promised you to Frank; will you make me false also? If you do you are my child no longer. Choose then between your father and betrothed husband, and this stranger whom you scarcely know. Will you abandon those who have loved you all your life long? Will you forsake us for Cyril Vernon?"

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### MR. LISLE'S VICTORY.

"Will you forsake us for Cyril Vernon?"

This was the startling question that fell upon poor Dolly's ears and heart, and made her wring her hands in bewildered agony.

"How can you speak to me so, papa?" she cried reproachfully. "Why will you make it a question of forsaking you? Could I forsake my own dear father for any one? Oh, surely, you are harder upon me than Frank himself would be! I believe that if I tell him the truth and implore him to release me he will do so, he was always kind and generous, except when he took advantage of my childish ignorance to bind me by a promise which ought never to have been made?"

Now Mr. Lisle knew perfectly well that Dolly judged Frank rightly; once let his generous heart suspect that the girl he had loved so long and truly was unhappy in the prospect of fulfilling her engagement with him, and not for worlds would he have held her bound; an appeal to Frank would have secured her freedom at once, therefore her father was resolved she should not make one.

Her marriage with his favorite had been the dream of his later years—in it he saw her happiness secured. Frank would never separate her long or far from her home, while—if this stranger took her—who could foresee her fate.

"For shame!" he said sternly. "To appeal to Frank as you say, would be to play upon his kind heart, and force him to set you free. And then what do you care how he may suffer! I forbid you to take such an ungenerous course with him—no, you must choose between us!"

The girl's eyes flashed through their tears. "It seems you think all of Frank's happiness, and nothing of mine," she said. "What right had he to bind a child by a promise that she could not comprehend? That was ungenerous, I think."

Mr. Lisle grew angry.

"Surely reproach to Frank comes with bad grace from you," he said, sternly. "All that he asked of you he gave—fidelity and faith! If you were in reality incapable of these virtues, and he, thinking better of you than you deserved, judge otherwise, it is rather his misfortune than his fault, I think, and he merits rather sympathy than blame. He has been shamefully deceived! Did it take you three years to understand your own heart? Do you understand it now? Is it after leading him on by a false hope for three long years, that you ruin his prospects and blast his life for the sake of a capricious fancy? By Heaven!" he went on, warming into genuine indignation, "if you do you are no child of mine! Is honor nothing then? Does not a solemn promise bind? Are the hopes of his young manhood to be laid at your feet, only that you may scatter them like so much worthless chaff, as you selfishly grasp at gratification of your own wishes, that shall secure your welfare, perhaps, at the cost of destroying his? I say you shall not commit this crime! My honor is concerned as well as yours, and you shall disgrace neither of us. Frank is coming home, his heart, his hopes, his very life bound up in you. Will you destroy him? No! I will save you from such infamy! I order you to put all thought of Vernon from your mind. Think of yourself only as Frank Osborn's promised bride; for I swear Dorothy, that if you play him false, I will disown you—you shall be no longer a child of mine!"

Dolly had listened to her father's vehement speech like one whom some great, sudden shock deprives of sense and motion.

She made no answer—no word of self-justification or defense.

Mr. Lisle had judged her rightly—she could defend her lover, but not herself.

For what defense had she, poor child, to make?

It was all true, she thought; she had done all her father said; she was in very deed the wretch he painted! Honor had been no check upon her; her solemn vows to Frank had all been broken; in her selfishness she had grasped at her own happiness, without one thought of his, and now, perhaps, his life was ruined utterly.

She had never realized what her own act involved before—never comprehended its full significance to others as well as to herself. Carried away on the flood-tide of passion to an ideal world, she had found there—Cyril, and love for him had made her blind to all the rest.

And now the flood tide had ebbed and left her stranded—where?

An unacknowledged wife, who dared not claim her name; a false coquette, who had betrayed a faithful lover; a daughter, repudiated and prejudged, and outcast from her father's heart.

A great despair came over her, all her spirit failed, she stood condemned before the double tribunal of her own conscience and her father's indignation.

She flung up her hands to her white face in shame and anguish.

"I have deserved it all! I have deserved it all!" she cried, and fled, sobbing wildly, to her room.

While Mr. Lisle, somewhat pale and ruffled still by his own vehemence, but growing calmer with the conviction that the victory was won, gradually broke into a slow, grave smile, well pleased.

"I thought I should bring her to her senses. A little witch—fickle and light as a butterfly, but good at heart, after all. And Frank will have her. In a month from now she'll be in love with him again, and Cyril Vernon forgotten; it is the way with women."

Which shows how much he knew about the sex in general, and his daughter Dolly in particular.

#### CHAPTER V.

##### "HE CHANGES WITH MY POISON."

No further allusion was made to the subject of that morning's conversation by either Dolly or her father, except that when she came downstairs to tea—having kept her room all day on pretext or reality of a headache—he took her into his arms and kissed her tenderly, and she returned the unexpected caress with almost convulsive intensity.

"There, there," he said, kindly, patting her golden head, "all will be well, and we will say no more about it."

And so the subject dropped.

She said nothing about it in her letters to her husband—brief, shy little letters as they were, written in secret, and posted surreptitiously.

"I'll wait till he returns; he has enough to annoy him now, no doubt," she thought, "and he will soon be here."

So the letters only told him, how she longed for him, and implored him to hasten back.

To do him justice, he needed no urging just then; nothing but the most important business could have kept him away from her, and even that business, though it involved a splendid fortune, required all Fred Hastings' influence to enforce its claims.

"For your wife's sake, remain," he would say; "since you have been guilty of the astounding folly of marrying a mere country girl, without means or family, your duty to her requires that you should make your position secure. If you are to be the owner of the Huntsford fortune, you can afford to snap your fingers at the world, and marry whom you please. But if you are to become an artist in earnest—a painter for bread—society will have something to say; and how can you make a name without society? If you would not drag this poor girl down to poverty, and ruin yourself forever, stay where you are. Keep this mad marriage secret, and wait for the course of events."

The advice appeared sound, and disinterested, too.

"In fact," said Cyril, candidly, "it's wonderful what a disinterested fellow you really are, Fred. You couldn't seem much more anxious for me to get the fortune if you believed that I should let you have the spending of it."

To which Mr. Hastings responded, with rather a sickly smile, that "perhaps he was not without hopes of getting a share," and Cyril assured him of what he had never doubted, namely, that if it came into his (Cyril's) hands, his hopes would be most generously fulfilled.

"For you're one of the best fellows I know, Fred, apart from your being my cousin. The worst fault you have is a lack of appreciation of my precious, charming little wife."

Fred laughed deprecatingly.

"I am not wanting in appreciation and admiration of herself, dear boy," said he, "but I really can't approve of her as your wife. The dear little girl never dreamed, I suppose, of the awful sacrifice you made; if she had, her love—if it be true love—would have prevented her accepting it."

Cyril Vernon looked up somewhat impatiently.

"I fail to see the awful sacrifice," said he, "and don't you ever tell her any such stuff as that. It might upset her, for she knows no more about real life than a child. What is this awful sacrifice, Fred, as you see it?"

Fred turned deliberately and looked at his questioner, elevating his eyebrows, and shrugging his shoulders with an excellent imitation of surprise.

"I thought you were joking at first," said he.

"My dear fellow, you are the most careless, or the most generous, I don't know which. Now, with regard to the sacrifice, couldn't any one see it but yourself? Why, even your pretty little, unsophisticated, country love—"

"My wife, if you please," interrupted Cyril, coldly.

"Oh, by all means, your wife. No sense in flying in the face of that Providence, since the fact is so. Even your wife, then, could see that much, I fancy, if the matter were clearly laid before her. Now just hear me state the case."

"Your Uncle Huntsford dies, and leaves you a splendid fortune, but upon certain conditions. First condition is that you marry May Ellis, his ward, a girl who possesses a fine fortune of her own, and who, as the testator fancies, loves you. Entre nous, cher Cyril, I am of the same opinion. Said May Ellis is a beautiful but deli-

cate girl, coming of a family of consumptives. None of the females of her house have reached the age of thirty, and she is now twenty-three. Once more entre nous, Cyril, pity that you hadn't married her to secure the fortune; first, while pretty Cousin Dolly could have proven her truth by waiting. Second condition requires that you marry May within a year. Third and last condition takes the form of a request, and does not bind, and is contained in a confidential letter to yourself, of which I know nothing. On this head information must come from you."

"If, however, you fail to comply with the two first named conditions, you forfeit all but a miserable thousand dollars a year, and—on the principle of unto him who hath, much more shall be given, I suppose—May Ellis takes the Huntsford revenues and estate. Unless, indeed, she refuses to marry you, a not very probable contingency. In that case you are the heir of Huntsford and may marry whomsoever you please."

"Now! Cannot any one see how your ridiculous marriage, pardon me, dear boy, truth will out, how your marriage ruins prospects? There has been no provision made for such a contingency; evidently the old man never thought of it. If your marriage becomes known the estate will go into litigation, and the lawyers will be the true heirs."

"But keep your marriage secret, at least until May has refused you, if she does refuse, that is your only chance."

"That's one way in which I consider you a sacrifice, here's another."

"If you had married the richest, best born woman, it would have spoiled your hopes of the estate, very true. But a rich wife would have made amends for that, and an influential one would have helped you to mend it. This one can only drag you down."

"And you might have had her, I suppose (no offense, dear boy, I judge by others, even the best of 'country girls') you might have had the little, simple thing on such far more easy terms. I said just now that I didn't know whether you were careless or generous—I take that back, what else, but the most unlimited, perfectly reckless generosity, could have induced you to marry her?"

Cyril sprang up from his chair and confronted him, stern and pale.

"Honor!" he cried. "And true love. Do you know what these words mean? Fred Hastings, if you spoke in earnest just now, you are a scoundrel!"

His features worked, his eyes blazed, his hands looked eager to be at the other's throat! Hastings saw that he had gone too far.

"Forgive me," he said, frankly. "You are right, and I am wrong; I did not realize the full meaning of my words; forgive me."

Cyril's anger began to die out.

"If we are to continue friends there must be no disrespect to her," he said, sitting down again. "She is my wife, and I adore her, whatever she has cost me!"

"Whatever she has cost me!"

Fred Hastings looked up quickly and curiously at those words—his position was beginning to work already.

"It was of you I thought," he said, softly. "She is a stranger to me, charming as she is; it is natural that I should think of you!"

"And natural that I should be grateful as I am believe me. Well, upon your showing, I have made more of a sacrifice than I realized at first, is true; but she is worthy of it all."

Fred Hastings sighed.

"Heaven grant you may always think so!" said he, earnestly. "And in order that you may do so, take my advice, and keep your marriage secret for a year."

Cyril started.

"A year! You are mad! Not see my treasure for a year? Impossible!"

"Of course; and I never proposed such a thing. I only said 'keep the marriage still unknown,' that need not prevent you living with your wife, you know."

And as his soft voice made the proposition, his eyes met Cyril's startled gaze, calm and serene as a child's.

"Have a little place for her. It need not be expensive. She will not wish for that; you will be together, and both perfectly happy, and as for secrecy, my dear Cyril, she believes herself to be Mrs. Vernon, does she not? While you are Mr. Huntsford in New York."

Cyril started and turned red, then pale.

"I am Cyril Vernon Huntsford, of course," he said, shamefacedly. "I always have meant to tell her that."

"But not yet," said the other, taking no notice of his confusion. "Do let me advise you not to tell her yet. It will make it so much easier for her. As Mr. and Mrs. Vernon you might live the year out in New York until the Huntsford fortune is quite settled."

Cyril had risen from his chair and walked the room quickly, in deep thought. His cousin's suggestion was full of charms for him.

It would re-unite them so much earlier. He could have her all to himself just as soon as their marriage should be made known to Mr. Lisle. No need to say anything about Huntsford to him—his daughter had married Cyril Vernon—he need know nothing more.

To Be Continued.