

matter so carefully that I believe, if you'll be guided by me, your little wife will actually help us out of difficulty."

"Tell me how?"

"By rousing, as I have suggested, May's jealousy, and causing her to refuse you in disgust. Then her fortune's yours; and what have you to do but fly away to Europe with Cousin Dolly, and bring her back as your bride? No one will be likely to question very closely as to when you married her; or, if they do, you're not bound to answer."

Cyril looked at his cousin with a curiously mixed expression of admiration and distrust.

"What a sharp fellow you are," he said. "A good fellow to have on one's own side, but I shouldn't much care to fight against you. You are somewhat unscrupulous as to your weapons, Fred."

The other laughed.

"No more so than my circumstances compel," he said. "I don't set up for a model of all virtues. I am as honest as a poor man can afford to be in these days."

"Your present plans are scarcely honest, though," said Cyril, quietly. "Though I dare say you never thought of the matter in that light. Circumstanced as I am I cannot really claim Huntsford at all, and the one honorable and straightforward course would be to go for my little wife, let the world know the truth, and leave May Ellis to claim her own."

Fred Hastings looked up in quick alarm.

"Good God! You would never be such a madman," he cried.

Cyril shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know about that. I believe it to be the right course. The question is, then, am I not bound, as a gentleman and an honest man, to adopt it?"

"Most emphatically and self-evidently not," cried Fred Hastings; "and none but a fool or a madman would do it. What! relinquish Huntsford without a struggle? If I were the heir they should cut me to pieces first."

"But if I am not the heir, if on account of my marriage my claim is void?"

"Then let the courts of law decide it so, don't assume such a state of affairs for yourself. Your marriage took place before the will was read; not afterward and in opposition to it; your uncle willed an impossible thing when he willed you to marry Miss Ellis and under those circumstances how far his condition binds you is not for you, but the law, to decide."

"Then you think the matter had better go into litigation?"

"Nothing of the kind. In that case, as I said once before, the law will swallow the fortune up, and neither you nor May be made the richer. For Heaven's sake, Cyril, and for your poor little wife's sake, act with common sense and lay aside these high-flown notions. Honor is well enough; but we live in a practical, modern world today, not in the old era of romance and chivalry. If you hand the Huntsford fortune over to Miss Ellis, your own poor little wife may starve."

Cyril laughed, though uneasily.

"Not quite so bad as that, I hope," he said. "I think I shall manage to give her enough to eat, at all events. But it is kind in you to have so much thought for her, poor little girl!"

He arose and walked the room uneasily.

"I protest that I don't know how to act in this affair in any of its phases," said he wearily.

Then Fred began to argue and explain.

"Where was the use of being so absolutely scrupulous?" he inquired. "The whole difficulty arose from a mere misapprehension on old Mr. Huntsford's part as to his nephew's circumstances. It is certain that he wished you for his heir. You, the last of his name! Why, in the event of your refusal, even, the fortune only goes to May for life, and she has enough already. Had your uncle known the truth he would have welcomed your young wife, and left the estate unconditionally. If you were a single man, and chose to throw wealth away, it would be your own affair entirely, but it appears to me that the matter wears a different aspect now."

Cyril could not deny it. The helpless young creature with whose welfare and happiness he had charged himself had undoubtedly a claim to be considered. His course of action ought to be taken with reference to her interests first of all.

"If I were not such an extravagant expensive devil myself," he sighed. "Poor little Dolly; she has never been crossed in anyway; it would be hard if she should suffer for her love's sake." (As if that was not always the natural fate of women!)

After a few moments of earnest thought Cyril began—with that indecision and propensity to lean upon another, which was the very keynote of his character:

"You advise me then to write, not to go?"

"Exactly. Write her a good, kind, sensible letter, explaining how the matter stands. No mention of Miss Ellis, of course, nor of the Huntsford fortune; time enough for that by and by. Tell her to be prepared to fly with you at any time, and let her send word what day has been named for the marriage, so we may know exactly how much time we can command."

"And then?"

"And then we will at once prepare her future home, and either you or I will go and fetch her."

"I will go myself," said Cyril. "She would not come with you."

"My dear boy, if you manage properly she will go with any one who comes to her from you. But as you please for that, of course. One thing, however, I do entreat you—be firm with her. Don't plead; don't coax; she is your wife, remember, and really you have made sacrifices enough. Tell her to be ready when you come, and she will. Coax, and the chances are that she will not. Believe me my dear boy, I know women!"

"You appear to," said Cyril, smiling. "Well, I'll take your advise in this part of the business, and for the present, at least; and now I'll go and write to her."

He left the room as he spoke, his cousin's eyes following him until the door closed after him.

Then Fred Hastings sprang to his feet with a stifled oath, and began to pace the room impatiently.

"Vicissitating fool!" he muttered; "he's hard either to lead or to drive. Command me to such honorable gentlemen, who have neither the virtue to make a sacrifice for what they consider the right nor the courage to set it boldly at defiance. Cyril is a sentimental driveler. With his honorable scruples, he would lose the fortune if left to himself—actually fling it away from him. But he shall not! I have an interest in the matter that he little dreams of. No, no, my good cousin, your innocence little suspects why I serve you so warmly. Perhaps, when the fortune is securely yours, and you read your uncle's letter, you may be wiser; for, by the old man's wish—not command—you are to pay me an income; and, if you die without leaving issue, I am to be the next heir."

He paused for a moment, thinking deeply, and with a strange and evil smile upon his face. Then he added slowly:

"As for your little wife, I see a way to make her useful, but I don't intend that she shall spoil my chances for me. No, no, pretty Cousin Dolly; I am to be the next heir!"

CHAPTER IX.

A SCRAP OF HUNTSFORD HISTORY.

CYRIL VERNON HUNTSFORD and Frederick Hastings were accounted cousins by courtesy and not by ties of blood.

Old Jonathan Huntsford had been blessed with a sister and a brother; both younger than himself, both tenderly beloved, and both—long years before my story opens—dead.

Cyril was the son of the one, Frederick the son of the other's husband, by a former wife.

He was really not related to the Huntsfords at all, but his step-mother, coming to him while he was a mere infant, had grown to love him dearly, and, dying, had commended him to her wealthy brother's patronage and care.

And he, though not inclined to like the young man on his own account, had done him many kindnesses for that dear sister's sake.

Dying, he had had it in his mind to do him a greater still, but two others must come first.

Cyril his brother's son, and his own natural heir; and May Ellis, his ward, whom he had loved as his own child—the daughter of the dead woman for whose dear memory's sake he had been content to live and die a bachelor.

"Your father and I were such good friends" he would tell the girl. "that there was but one thing in the world I grudged him—your mother, child, and he took her in spite of me. Poor fellow, he did not have her long before you came and she took flight to Heaven. Ten years afterward, when he followed her, and left you to me, I was the richest after all."

It had been his darling wish to marry her to his nephew, and there is little doubt this desire would have been gratified in spite of Cyril's cool indifference to the lady's charms, had it not been for the young man's eventful visit to Greendale, and his mad infatuation for a simple country girl.

Of all which the old man knew nothing. He had made his will with a view to securing the realization of his favorite dream, and, only the very day before his sudden death, he called Fred Hastings to him.

"You will find that I have not forgotten you, Fred," he said, kindly. "You have a little independence of your own already, and are an economical dog to boot; but I have willed you five thousand; and this letter which is not to be opened until the fortune is settled, commends your future to Cyril's care. Lock it in my desk my boy, he will receive it when I'm dead."

Fred did as he was told, with many expressions of surprise and regret that Mr. Huntsford should talk about his death.

"I trust we shall have you with us for many years yet!" said he hypocritically, and mentally he added "I'll know the contents of that letter before Cyril does, ay, perhaps before the night is over."

And he did. In the dead of night, when all the house was still, Fred Hastings entered noiselessly the old man's room and bent softly over his bed.

Presently the peculiar odor of chloroform filled all the room, and Jonathan Huntsford never stirred or knew when Fred took the keys of his private desk from underneath his pillow.

The letter was taken from the desk, carried to Fred's own room, and there read leisurely. He trusted to chance to give him an opportunity of restoring it.

It came next day—in the confusion and distress attendant on the old man's sudden death. No one noticed or knew when Fred took the keys, and replaced the letter.

And he was master of its contents. He held the key to his own destiny in his own hands.

"I might have made a thousand mistakes not knowing," was his reflection, "but now I shall govern myself accordingly, and win Cyril, and I will be next heir!"

That portion of the letter which related to his interest ran thus:

"And lastly, I command to you most earnestly, for his foster-mother's sake, your so-called cousin, Fred Hastings. I am painfully conscious that I may have been somewhat unjust in my judgment of this young man, from a personal prejudice against him.

"My sister thought him affectionate—he may have been so to her—honorable, conscientious, well-principled, and full of talent. I, with certainly fewer opportunities of observing, have judged him differently.

"To me he seems smooth and false, self-interested, cold, cunning, treacherous, and cruel; a man devoid of warm or generous feeling, incapable of sacrificing himself for a friend, capable of mean shifts and tricks in his own interest, a time-serving, polished knave.

"But I am old, and full of whims and fancies, and I disliked his father.

"Be on your guard against him, and observe him well without appearing to do so. If you find that my judgement wronged him, make him amends for mine and my sister's sake.

"In this way: If your marriage be blessed with children they are your natural heirs. In such case I desire you to make over to Fred a life annuity of two thousand a year.

"But if on the contrary, you die without issue, make Fred your heir. Let him take the family name and the old estate, for the sake of the mother whose child he was, in heart though not by blood.

"These suggestions I offer to your own judgement, not laying them on you as a command, but merely as an expressed desire. I heartily hope that a son of your own will be the next heir to Huntsford."

"So hope not I," thought Fred, as he reclosed the letter, and sealed it with his uncle's seal (which to the old gentleman's great annoyance, was missing from his desk).

"My role must be to win Cyril's confidence, and convince him, at all events, that his uncle's complimentary opinion of my humble self is false. He must not marry May, either, if she can be brought to refuse him. He must not marry at all. I will be next heir to Huntsford."

Possessing this knowledge, and entertaining such views, Fred's chagrin can be better imagined than described, when, on going to summon Cyril on the occasion of his uncle's death, he learned that he was already married

CHAPTER X.

FRANK'S WEDDING EVE

Dolly ran, bright and blushing, to her room, to read over, once more, in happy solitude, her husband's letter. From this occupation she was summoned almost immediately by the arrival of her modiste, to try on her wedding-dress.

The girl shrank from an act so unnecessary, and which seemed to her conscious soul so full of deceit.

"Oh, no, no, no!" she faltered; "pray let it go it will be time enough tomorrow."

But she blushed as she said it, and the mortuary remorse and distress could not quell the tumult of wild happiness that agitated her gentle breast, at the thought that Cyril would soon be here. Altogether, between her blushes, and smiles, and tears, as she stood, like some soft, timid fluttering bird, ready to take wing and fly away, she looked so lovely that even Frank, careful as he ever was not to urge his wishes against hers, even Frank implored her to be kind for once, and gladden all their eyes with a glimpse of the bonny bride who should be all his own tomorrow.

She complied immediately,

"It is a little thing to do for you, Frank," she said, humbly. "I wish I could do more."

And she sighed, involuntary, and her cheeks grew pale, but Frank never noticed that. He was growing accustomed to her changeable moods and Mr. Lisle had reassured him. Indeed it was almost impossible for a mind so essentially honest and generous as Frank's to conceive of, much less suspect, the deception that was being practiced upon him.

To him—aided by her father's assurances and explanations—her blushing, trembling, paling, sighing meant natural emotion and no more. She to shrink from him, and fear him. Her true lover, whom she had ruled with a despotic sway from childhood—whom her little white hands could mold as easily as wax. If you had told him that he was afraid of her, he would have seen more sense in it.

For he was afraid sometimes of the great and solemn charge which he was yet so eager to

assume. She was so young, so exquisitely sweet and fair, a being at once more delicate and pure, more frail and weak, than himself.

Was it possible for a big, rough fellow like himself to understand rightly this beautiful, changeable, puzzling creature, with no better keys to the mysteries of her nature and heart than those of sincere faith and true love?

"I am not worthy of her," he would think.

"No man can be worthy, though she might easily have chosen a better man. But this I know—the whole world might be searched, from pole to pole, without finding one who could love her better than I do."

And then he would comfort himself with the memory of her own words—"I love you just the same"—for he had never for a moment suspected what "just the same" might mean.

He was musing much in this fashion on that summer afternoon, while Dolly, to please him, was donning the wedding-dress she well knew she never should wear. She broke in upon his dreamings presently, robed in shining white, a vision of beauty and purity and love that seemed too fair for earth.

He started, and his bronzed cheek grew pale as he looked at her.

"My own! my own!" he cried, in a low, deep voice of uncontrollable emotion, and before she was aware of his intention, suddenly caught her to his breast.

She struggled wildly, and broke away, flushed and panting.

"You must not! You ought not! she gasped, not knowing what she said, her thoughts filled only with Cyril. "Oh, it is cruel of you, cruel!"

He looked at her with surprise, reproach, pain—all at once—then he held out his arms.

"You will be my wife to-morrow," he said imploringly. "Oh, come to me this once of your own accord, my dearest—but this once!"

But she kept aloof, and shook her head, tears springing in her eyes.

"You are so rough. You would spoil my dress," she said.

He turned away with a sigh.

"You must have your way," he said gently, and half sadly, "now and always. You are the fairest dearest bride that ever the day dawned on and you shall have your way."

And he turned gently away.

Then the capricious, conscientious, guilty, tender-hearted creature melted. The thought of what he would suffer so soon overwhelmed her. With a little, tender cry of grief and pity, she flew to him, and flung her lovely arms around his neck.

"Dear Frank, kind Frank, true heart, oh, forgive me! Don't grieve too much, because I am unworthy, oh, so unworthy of your true love!"

And she clung to him and wept upon his bosom.

As for Frank, he clasped her to his heart and held her there in a maze of delighted surprise. He had no clew to the mystery of her sudden kindness, nor did he think of seeking one. He received it without question, as the birds take flowers and dews, and his long hungry heart found it no less sweet and welcome.

But he soothed and caressed her fondly.

"We shall be so happy," he said.

"Oh, if I only could believe it! For you dear Frank, for you! Oh, if I only could believe it, the comfort that belief would be!"

"You may believe it, then my dear one. At this moment, when I hold you in my arms, of your own free will, I am the very happiest man alive. What will it be then, when, to-morrow morn, you give me the right to hold you so forever?"

Scarcely had he finished speaking when she drew herself away.