



## CHAPTER III.

## IT WAS THINE OATH THAT FIRST DID FAIL.

Nearly a year had gone since Cyprian Davenant had turned his back upon British soil. It was the end of May, high season in London, and unusually brilliant weather; the West End streets and squares thronged with carriages, and everywhere throughout that bright western world a delightful flutter and buzz of life and gayety, as if the children of that pleasant region had indeed in some manner secured an exemption from the cares and sorrows of meaner mortals, and were bent on making the most of their privileged existence.

A neatly appointed brougham waited before the door of a house in Half-Moon street, and had been waiting there for some time. It was Mrs. Walsingham's brougham, and the lady herself was slowly pacing to and fro in her little drawing-room, pausing every now and then to look out of the window, and in a very unpleasant state of mind. She was elegantly dressed in her favorite toilet of Indian muslin and lace, and was looking very handsome, in spite of the cloud upon her smooth white brow, and a certain ominous glitter in her blue eyes.

"I suppose he is not coming," she muttered at last, tossing her white lace parasol upon the table with an angry gesture. "This will be the second disappointment in a week. But I shall not go to the concert without him. What do I care for their tiresome classical music, or to be stared at by a crowd of great ladies who don't choose to know me?"

She rang the bell violently, but before it could be answered there came a thundering double knock at the door below, and a minute afterward Gilbert Sinclair dashed into the room, bearing in his hand a beautiful bouquet of your fragrant flowers.

"Late again, Gilbert," cried Mrs. Walsingham, reproachfully, her face brightening nevertheless at his coming; and she smiled at him with a pleased welcoming smile as they shook hands.

"Yes, I know it's late for that confounded concert. But I want you to let me off that inflection. Clara, do you know who doesn't know the difference between Beethoven and you know I have a heap of engagements on my hands?"

"You have only come to cry off, then?" said Mrs. Walsingham, with a sudden contraction of her firmly molded lips.

"My dear Clara, what a fiend you look when you like! But I wouldn't cultivate that kind of expression if I were you. Of course, I'll go to the concert with you, if you are bent upon it, rather than run the risk of anything in the way of a scene. But you know very well that I don't care for music, and you ought to know."

He stopped, hesitating, with a furtive look in his red-brown eyes, and a nervous action of one big hand about his thick brown mustache.

"I ought to know what, Mr. Sinclair?" asked Clara Walsingham, with a sudden hardness of voice and manner.

"That it is neither good for your reputation nor mine that we should be seen so often together at such places as this Fortman Square concert. It is almost a private affair, you know, and everybody present will know all about us."

"Indeed! and since when has Mr. Gilbert Sinclair become so careful of his reputation—or of mine?"

"Since you set your friends talking about our being engaged to be married, Mrs. Walsingham. You have rather too many feminine acquaintances with long tongues. I don't like being congratulated, or chaffed—it comes to pretty much the same thing—upon an event which you know never can happen."

"Never is a long word, Gilbert. My husband may die, and leave me free to become your wife, if you should do me the honor to repeat the proposal which you made to me six years ago."

"I don't like waiting for dead men's shoes, Clara," answered Sinclair, in rather a sulky tone. "I made you that offer in all good faith, when I believed you to be a widow, and when I was madly in love with you. But six years is a long time, and—"

"And men are fickle," she said, taking up his unfinished sentence. "You have grown tired of me, Gilbert; is that what you mean?"

"Very likely, but I had met him in society very often before. He's rather a handsome fellow, no doubt; but I certainly couldn't discover any special merit in him beyond his good looks. He's a near neighbor of the Clanyards, by the way, when he's at home, is he not?"

"When he's at home, yes," answered the solicitor. "But I doubt if ever he'll go home again."

"You mean that he'll come by his death in Africa, I suppose?"

"I sincerely hope not, for Cyprian Davenant is one of my oldest friends. No; I mean that he's not very likely to see the inside of his ancestral halls any more. The place is to be sold this year."

"The baronet is quite cleared out, then?"

"He has about four hundred a year that he inherited from his mother, so tightly tied up that he has not been able to make way with it."

"What Clanyards are those?" asked Mrs. Walsingham.

that doubt, telling himself that it was his wealth she cared for.

"Would it grieve you very much if I were to marry, Clara?" he asked.

"Grieve me if you were to marry! It would be the end of my life. I would never forgive you. But you are playing with me. You are only trying to frighten me."

"You are frightening yourself," he answered. "I only put the question in a speculative way. Let us drop the subject. If you want to go to the concert—"

"I don't want to go; I am not fit to go anywhere. Will you ring that bell, please? I shall send the brougham back to the stable."

"Won't you drive in the park this fine afternoon?"

"No; I am fit for nothing now."

A maid-servant came in answer to the bell.

"You can take my bonnet, Jane," said Mrs. Walsingham, removing that floral structure, "and tell Johnson I shall not want the brougham to-day. You'll stay to dinner, won't you, Gilbert?" she went on when the maid had retired. "Mr. Wyatt is to be here, and Sophy Morton."

"How fond you are of the actor people. So Jim Wyatt is coming, is he? I rather want to see him. But I have other engagements this afternoon, and I really don't think I can stay."

"Oh, yes, you can, Gilbert. I shall think I had just grounds for my suspicion if you are so eager to run away."

"Very well, Clara, if you make a point of it, I will stop."

Mr. Sinclair threw himself into one of the low luxurious chairs with an air of resignation scarcely complimentary to his hostess.

The interval before dinner dragged heavily, in spite of Mrs. Walsingham's efforts to sustain pleasant conversation about trifles.

The conversation dawdled on in a languid manner for a couple of hours, and then Mr. Sinclair went away to change his dress for the dining-dinner costume.

The smile which Mrs. Walsingham's face had worn while she talked to him faded the moment he had left her, and she began to pace the room with rapid steps and a darkly clouded brow.

"Yes, there is no doubt about it," she muttered to herself, with suppressed passion. "I have seen the change in him for the last twelve months. There is some one else. How should I lose him if it were not so? Heaven knows what pains I have taken to retain my hold upon him! There is some one else. He is afraid to tell me the truth. He is wise in that respect. Who can the woman be for whom I am forsaken?"

He knows so many people, and visits so much, and is everywhere courted and flattered on account of his money. Oh, Gilbert, fool, fool! Will any woman ever love you as I have loved you, for your own sake, without a thought of your fortune, with a blind idolatry of your very faults? What is it that I love in him, I wonder? I know that he is not a good man. I have seen his heartlessness to hard and cruel as to soft and gentle, and he is as merciless toward those who come between him and his iron will. But I, too, could be hard and remorseless if a great wrong were done me. Let him take care now he provokes a passionate, reckless nature like mine. Let him beware of playing with fire."

This was the gist of her thoughts during a gloomy reverie that lasted more than an hour. At the end of that time Miss Morton was announced, and came fluttering into the room, resplendent in a brilliant costume of rose-colored silk and black lace, followed shortly by James Wyatt, the lawyer, courteous and debonair, full of small-talk and fashionable scandal. Gilbert Sinclair was the last to enter.

The dinner was elegantly served in a pretty little dining-room, hung with pale green draperies and adorned with a few clever water-color pictures, a room in which there was a delightful air of coolness and repose.

Mr. Wyatt was invaluable in the task of sustaining the conversation, and Clara Walsingham seconded him admirably, though there was a sharp anguish at her heart that was now almost a habitual pain, an agony prophetic of a coming blow. Gilbert Sinclair was a little brighter than he had been in the afternoon, and contributed his share to the talk with a decent grace, only once or twice betraying absence of mind by a random answer and a wandering look in his big brown eyes.

James Wyatt and Mrs. Walsingham had been running through a catalogue of the changes of fortune, for good or evil, that had befallen their common acquaintances, when Gilbert broke in upon their talk suddenly with the question:

"What has become of that fellow who dined with us at Richmond last year? Sir Cyprian somethin'."

"Sir Cyprian Davenant," said James Wyatt. "He is still in Africa."

"In Africa! Ah, yes, to be sure, I remember hearing that he was going to join Harcourt's expedition. I was not much impressed by him, though I had heard him talk about as something out of the common way. He had precious little to say for himself."

"You saw him at a disadvantage that day. He was out of spirits at leaving England."

"Very likely, but I had met him in society very often before. He's rather a handsome fellow, no doubt; but I certainly couldn't discover any special merit in him beyond his good looks. He's a near neighbor of the Clanyards, by the way, when he's at home, is he not?"

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She fixed her eyes upon Sinclair with a very poor place it is, within mile or two of Davenant. The old vicar count is as poor as Job."

"Indeed! But his younger daughter will make a great match, no doubt, and redeem the fortunes of the house. I saw her at the opera the other night. She was pointed out to me as the loveliest girl in London, and really think she has a right to be called so. What do you think of her, Gilbert?"

She fixed her eyes upon Sinclair with a great scrutiny that took him off his guard. A dusky flush came over his face, and he hesitated awkwardly before replying to her very simple question.

Clara Walsingham's heart gave a great throb.

"That is the woman," she said to herself.

"Miss Clanyard is very handsome," stammered Gilbert; "at least I believe that is the general opinion about her. She has been intimate with your friend Davenant ever since she was a child, hasn't she, Wyatt?" he asked, with an indifference of tone which one listener

might have expected.

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