

FAIR OPHELIA.

CHAPTER III.—Continued.

"Not much. They do not care for him any more than we do."

"Poor Master Basil! I wonder what he would say if he knew your faith was given to another?"

Tears started to Lilly's eyes, and her lips began to tremble.

"I feel so false. Sometimes in my dreams I see him stand before me, looking so reproachful, so miserable. If he only knew the truth why I consent to this marriage he would forgive me."

That was the last time Lilly had occasion to speak so freely to Peggy. After that day the preparations for her wedding took up every moment.

Ralph was determined not to wait long for his bride, and coaxed Lord Audley into naming a very early date.

Lilly rebelled at first, but after a few hours' thought agreed to their wishes, on condition that Ralph would forego the usual wedding-trip.

"I do not want to leave Dalville. I have travelled nearly all over the world, so do not care to visit those far-off lands again. If you are willing to remain at home I will marry you any day you wish," she said decidedly.

Ralph frowned, but her determined look showed him that her resolution was not to be shaken, so, with many muttered curses, he gave in.

Their wedding was a quiet one, Gipsy being the only bridesmaid. A few friends were present, including the squire, his daughter Rita, and her young husband, but Lilly felt deep relief when the long tedious day was over.

"How different it would have been had Basil only lived! What joy this day would have brought us! And now all I feel is unutterable weariness, a longing to end my new life even before it has commenced!"

With a half sob she sank into one of the velvet chairs, and bowed her fair head on to her hands.

Her thoughts were far away. She scarcely remembered where she was, until a touch on her arm aroused her, and, looking up, she saw Ralph Rosslyn standing before her.

"Well, my pure stately Lilly, my fairest Ophelia, of whom were you dreaming?" he asked banteringly.

She started erect, and faced him haughtily, looking like a pale spirit in her clinging white robes.

"Not of you!" she answered curtly.

"So I perceive," Ralph muttered grimly, stretching out his hands to draw her near him. "Remember, my beautiful wife, that you are mine now, and those absurd prejudices you have against me must be dispelled. Come, give me a kiss—a seal to our bridal."

In spite of her shrinking he bent and would have kissed her, but the icy coldness of her lips chilled the warmth of his caress, and, with a stifled oath, he set her free.

"Perhaps you will be less indifferent in the future," he said angrily. "I will not annoy you now. The knowledge that you are my wife is joy enough for to-day. Good-night."

"Good-night," Lilly answered carelessly; but as the door closed upon him, she flung herself on her knees, trying to stifle the bitter cry which rose to her lips.

"Oh, Heavens, how can I bear it? This daily torture will kill me! To hear his harsh voice and feel the touch of his hands on mine is horrible enough; but the contact of his lips is worse than death."

Sobs shook her fragile form, and tears fell thickly down her pallid cheeks. For the first time she fully realized all she would have to endure—the mental suffering this hated marriage would bring into her life—and for a moment it seemed as if any fate would be better than the one her father had forced upon her.

CHAPTER IV.

Several months passed swiftly by, and Ralph had not yet been able to win his wife's heart.

If anything, she was colder—more indifferent to him—often rousing his worst passions by her quiet contempt.

In vain Gipsy tried to draw them to gether; her gentle words were powerless to bring peace into the house. Loving a Lilly was to her, Ralph's name caused many bitter quarrels between them.

"I wish you would be kinder to Ralph," she pleaded one day. "After all, he is your husband and loves you."

"If I could only forget the bond that links us together! Do not speak of him Gipsy. My hatred deepens each day, and if it were not for you, I feel sure I should leave him."

"That would be worse than useless," Gipsy answered sadly, lifting her big dark eyes to Lilly's proud face. "He would not let you go, and if you went away, he would only bring you back again."

"Hateful man! How I loathe him!" "Hush, Lilly! You must not say that; he is my brother, and I do not like to hear you speak so bitterly against him."

"It seems almost impossible you are truly of kin. One thing: whatever faults lie buried in his heart, yours is pure and tender enough," Lilly said, warmly pressing her lips to the girl's pale brow. "I only wish you were happier, dearest. I am afraid my home is but a dreary one

and your young life is shadowed by my misery. You look ill—worn out—and yet you never complain. What is the matter, Gipsy?"

A faint color stole into the girl's pale cheeks, and her eyes fell before Lilly's keen gaze. Her hands trembled so she could scarce hold her book, but she strove bravely to hide her emotion.

"It is nothing, Lilly; I do not think I am very well, and the cold weather chills me."

Lilly sighed, and looked anxiously into her companion's face, she saw something there which puzzled and alarmed her—a gradual change that had escaped her careless gaze before.

"Yes, you are ill, Gipsy, and I shall ask Dr. Leslie to come and see you. You are my only comfort, so I do not want to lose you."

Gipsy did not respond, she let Lilly think it was bodily illness that made her face pale and thin and her eyes so sunken. How could she confess the truth—that her heart was broken, and the memory of a dead love fast drawing her to the grave?

Their *tête-à-tête* was interrupted by the sudden entrance of a maid, who came respectfully across the room.

"If you please, madame, Mrs. Leigh is here; shall I show her in?"

"Certainly, Bessie; I have been waiting for her all the morning."

The next instant Peggy stood before Lilly, her pretty round face a little brighter in expression than it had been for many months.

Clinging to her hand, barely able to keep on his tiny feet, was a golden-haired boy, whose innocent eyes peeped shyly from Peggy's black skirts.

"I am glad you brought Johnny with you," Lilly said kindly. "He will not be so lonely here."

"Thank you, Mrs. Rosslyn; I knew you would not mind, and I hardly like leaving him behind; I cannot bear to lose sight of him."

"I can quite understand that. Here is the lace I wanted you to mend, and when that is finished, Miss Gipsy has one or two little things for you to do. You will find a nice fire in the housekeeper's room, so you had better work there."

Peggy smiled gratefully, and took the heap of beautiful lace Lilly gave into her hands; as she crossed the room, Gipsy, who had been caressing little Johnny, looked up with a sweet enquiry in her eyes.

"May I have the boy for a few minutes? I know he will be good with me."

"But he will worry you, Miss Gipsy; you don't know what a mischievous child he is!" Peggy answered, gazing at her young son with fond proud worship.

"Oh, no, I am not afraid; and when I am tired of him, I promise I will send him to you. Will you leave him?"

"You are too kind, miss, and I thank you very much for noticing my poor babe. He will be as happy as a king with you!"

Gipsy laughed merrily, and lifting Johnny into her lap took off his hat and cloak.

"Isn't he a pretty child? Look at his beautiful little arms!" she said softly as Peggy left the room.

Lilly sat down beside her, and gazed fondly at the boy's sweet baby-face. Her hand trembled as it touched the silky golden locks.

"Yes; he is a lovely laddie, and his mother ought to be proud of him. I wish I had it in my power to lift the shadow of sin from his life, and the shame which will cling to him in the far future!"

Gipsy did not speak, but her tremulous lips were pressed to Johnny's fair cheek. Meeting his wondering, half-piteous look, she shook off the sudden gloom, and commenced a gay romp with him.

In the midst of it, while she still knelt on the floor, her dusky hair falling loosely about her face, her eyes sparkling with a light rarely seen in their depths, the door opened to admit Ralph Rosslyn.

His stern gaze fell coldly on the pretty group; then wandered to where his wife sat reading, close to the warm hearth.

As if warned of an evil presence, Johnny staved his sweet shrill laughter, and nestling trustfully in Gipsy's arms, gazed affrightedly at the intruder.

"What does this mean? I thought at least a dozen children were playing in the house! Who is your young friend, Gipsy? How is it I have never seen him before?"

Ralph asked slowly.

Almost unconsciously Gipsy hugged the child closer to her breast, and all the pretty color faded from her cheeks, leaving them whiter than before.

"It is your own fault if you do not know little Johnny," she retorted. "He is Peggy Leigh's child."

The frown deepened on Ralph's brow, and he glanced angrily at the tiny babe; furious passion was in his heart, but he dared not let it break beyond control.

"So you dared bring a murderer's low-born son into the house? I wonder at you, Gipsy, encouraging that woman here, when you know I have forbidden her the house!"

Lilly glanced up as those words fell on her ears, and a haughty smile curved her lips.

"Peggy is here by my commands. I have work for her to do; and certainly shall not consult you in the choice of my needlewomen."

"I do not expect you to; but at least

that child shall not blacken my home by his hated presence! If you do not take him from my sight I shall do him harm!"

Ralph hissed hoarsely.

The disdain written on his wife's face goaded him almost to madness; with one quick stride he crossed the room, and, pausing before Gipsy, stretched out his hand as if to grasp the child's small form.

The hot blood rushed to Gipsy's smooth brow, and as she thrust Johnny behind her with one hand, she struck her brother fiercely with the other.

"You coward! Would you dare touch a helpless babe? If I were a man I would knock you down for your brutal violence!"

Ralph fell back a step, looking at the little dauntless figure with blazing eyes. Before he had recovered from his surprise or had quite realized her swift rebellion, Gipsy had caught the boy in her arms, carrying him swiftly to his mother.

Peggy looked up as Gipsy entered, and a low cry rose to her lips; the terrible agitation written on the girl's face warned her something had happened, though she could only dimly guess at the truth.

"What is it, Miss Gipsy? What has happened?" she asked breathlessly, gathering poor trembling Johnny to her breast.

"Do not ask me now, I must go; but do not attempt to follow," Gipsy answered rapidly, and with throbbing brain and wildly beating heart, she fled hurriedly back to Lilly's boudoir.

Meanwhile, Ralph had not improved in temper at her sudden departure; he was wrathful, revengeful, so turned upon his wife to vent his spite.

"Why will you always defy me? Why is it you always act contrary to my wishes, no matter what those wishes are?" he said hotly, moving to where she was so quietly sitting.

Her pretty brows were drawn together in a surprised pucker, and without lifting her eyes she answered his wild words with almost forced calmness:

"Because your commands are unjust, and you know it! Peggy is poor, and unless we give her work to do, she and her child will starve. How many people who now employ her would do so if I did not set the example? Until her husband's name is cleared, she will be forced to strive hard to earn a living!"

"Then let her starve! I tell you it is an insult to me to encourage her here! The knowledge of her husband having murdered your lover ought to be sufficient to make you hold yourself aloof!"

"But suppose I did not believe Simon did the deed? Suppose my doubts are of another, and my heart points to the true culprit?"

As she spoke, Lilly rose to her feet, and stood defiantly in front of her husband. Her pale cheeks looked even paler than usual, her eyes intense. There was almost the same look on her face Ralph had seen but once before—on the night of Basil's death, and for a moment he covered and shrank quietly back.

"Your mind is full of strange fancies. I am not surprised this idea should be amongst them," he said slowly. "If Leigh is innocent, who is guilty?"

His tones were so insolent Lilly could have struck his mocking face with her clenched hand.

Hot words rose to her lips—words that she would have never uttered had not her soul been stirred with unusual passion.

"What if I say you are guilty? How often has that thought entered my heart, bringing untold horror and despair. I have always hated you—shuddered from your presence as one shrinks from what is evil! It would not be at all curious if my unerring instinct had condemned you as a murderer!"

Whiter and more livid grew the face her eyes were so eagerly scanning; the blue veins about his brow stood out in great knots, his lips twitched in spite of his endeavor to still them.

He had grasped her frail wrist fiercely, making her almost cry with pain; pride forced her to rest silent and bear that cruel clasp with courage.

Bending closer to her he looked long and earnestly into her fearless eyes; then with a hoarse brutal laugh he flung her from him.

"So be it. Since you doubt you shall know the truth—if only to humble some of your miserable pride!" he said, and each word fell clearly on her ears. "You tell me Simon is innocent; you are right, and when you fix upon me as the criminal you are not far out. I did not think I had such an exceedingly clever wife. The penetration you have shown has quite bewildered me!"

"You are guilty! You killed poor Basil!" Lilly gasped, scarce daring to believe him, though his confession only strengthened her fears.

"Yes; you might have known I alone was guilty! Glandore was your accepted lover, therefore my rival; and as he refused to give you up, I struck him from my path! I would do it again if necessary!"

"You villain! And to think that another has suffered all this time for your guilt! But you shall not escape unpunished; the world shall know the truth from your lips!"

Ralph laughed, and the sound grated unpleasantly on Lilly's ears; it was so full of terrible triumph.

"If I had feared you, do you think I

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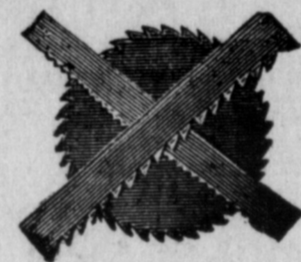
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