



## CHAPTER XXIV.

Lord Malincourt received with his shaving water on Thursday morning a dreadful letter—a dreadful letter. There was no other word for it, and he could not put it by as nonsense, since he had always avowed Jane Appuldurcombe to be the only woman of sense in his wife's family—his wife, of course, excepted.

Categorically, by bell, book and candle, she arraigned Lesley on the charge of deliberately fomenting a quarrel between her son, Ronald Kilmurray, and Graham Dashwood, of running away like a coward when the train was laid in pure wantonness provoked the love of the son whom Jane Appuldurcombe now saw dying or next to dying before her eyes.

Lord Malincourt's lips whitened as he read. It was the old story, and "Si non e vero, e ben trovato" rang insistently through his mind as he dressed.

Why had Lesley come back so pale, so altered, in such haste, too, unless she left some serious wrongdoing behind her?

The sickening pain that only a child's misconduct—never that of a father or mother—can bring to a man's heart contracted Malincourt's, and yet, knowing Lesley so well, he could not believe her so guilty as she appeared, and down stairs, when she came up to kiss him, as usual, leaning her forehead for a moment against his shoulder, he swore stoutly to himself that she had done no wrong, yet Cecilia had never embroiled herself like this, being indeed the product of a different epoch, and it was surely Lesley's own fault that she must make herself altogether delightful to whomsoever she found in her company.

So perturbed was he that for once he ate next to no breakfast, a fact alarming in itself, since it seems to be part of the Almighty's scheme of creation that man shall sleep and eat through everything—possibly that he may be able to bear heroically the burden of woman.

"Dad," said Lesley, going up to him presently with the cool courage that never deserted her, "you've heard about Ronny Kilmurray this morning, and you think it is my fault, don't you?"

Lord Malincourt disinterred the unwelcome epistle from his breast pocket and gave it to her without a word, but his glance was a tower of strength to Lesley, and she stopped to kiss him before she unfolded the letter, which she read through quite calmly from beginning to end. There she said simply:

"You know better, dad. I did refuse to recognize Sir Graham Dashwood, whose manners were an insult to any woman, but I did not know Ronny had challenged him, and I ran away, dad, because"—she turned aside and hid her face in both hands—"I had fallen in love with Ronny—and given him up to another woman. She loved him before I did."

Lord Malincourt swallowed something in his throat, then put a strong arm gently round the girl's shoulders; but it trembled, for he seemed to see Cecilia in the bowed head, the young shape—Cecilia as she had told him that she could not love him because a town spark had caught her fancy—and the town spark had married an ugly woman with a million of money, and he, Bob, had married Cecilia and had made her happy. And now her child must go through with the same suffering.

"Lassie, my dear," he said, "I wish I could help you to bear it." And he did help her as the first tears she had shed since the fatal news came fell on his breast.

"She is his mother," said Lesley presently. "I forgive her. But it was rather a mistake sending me to town, wasn't it, dad?" she asked, lifting her face, hopeless with the hopelessness of youth, whose eyes are yet unopened to life's horizon and its infinite scope.

"I guessed you would be up to mischief, lassie," he said sadly, "and I did wrong. You never were one to ride on the curb, but I never dreamed it would end in such trouble as this. In my opinion, however, your Ronny will not die. To be alive at all after his injuries is a miracle, and who is to know the miracle may not continue?"

Lesley stood looking down at awhile, deep in thought. At last she looked up and said:

"Dad, you'll keep Bob away for a day or two, won't you? Say I'm dead, offended, anything, only keep him away!"

## CHAPTER XXV.

Lady Cranstoun had wired for news to Yelverton, and every day a fresh bulletin came—no good news and no bad. Ronny was still alive, but he might die at any moment. It was impossible to say how things would turn out.

These telegrams were supplanted by laborious letters, for, like most of his class, Yelverton was a bad penman and a worse speller, and a major part of his endeavors consisted in entreating that Lady Cranstoun would not let Lesley worry herself, as it wasn't her fault or anybody's fault but that unmentionable disgraceful scoundrel Dashwood's.

Lady Appuldurcombe, he mentioned, was bearing up well. She would rather have her darling's pieces to tend than any whole sinner whomsoever, and if

Ronny died she would have the comfort of knowing that all his last hours had been hers. There had been some talk of Cynthia de Salis coming over, as by Lady de Salis' death Ronny's mother was left practically in charge of the girl, but nothing was settled yet, as Ronny was exceedingly anxious to be conveyed home, whether he died on the road or not.

And in those days Lesley had one of her worst blisters removed in the person of Bob, who, obeying a blunt word or two of advice given by Lord Malincourt, had gone to Homburg for a month.

"Leave her alone, my boy," he had said. "There is nothing on earth answers with a woman like a little absence sometimes. Try it."

And Bob went, not even getting that goodby from Lesley which she had somehow successfully eluded.

"What a lot you will have heard about me before you come back," she thought bitterly, for all her thoughts were bitter now, and the consequence, the gaiety of youth that had distinguished her in town were far indeed from her now.

And every day Lord Malincourt cursed the error of judgment that had made him send his little girl into that Vanity Fair which, with all its shams and cruelty, he knew so well and through which she had danced gayly, only to come out on the other side a wan, sad-eyed woman.

And August was the dullest month to him in the whole year, as he did not go to Scotland, and the last was yet afar off. To that all seemed barren to him, from Dan to Beersheba.

And yet it happened that in those burning days, toward the latter end of the month, a ripple of change came, for late one afternoon who should Lesley see, dancing along under the trees, but Miss Coquette, led by one of Lord Cranstoun's grooms, and riding behind her Major Yelverton.

It was as if Miss Coquette, sniffing the air delicately, scented her beloved mistress, and at sight of her she whinnied, and when the girl ran up there was such a meeting between them as left Yelverton quite out in the cold.

Perhaps he thought she had taken her punishment lightly as she dashed into the house, then out again, with snarl for the mare, but he knew this was not so when presently in the great entrance hall she lifted her eyes to his and said:

"Ronny?"

"I don't know," said Yelverton simply. "Sometimes I think he will recover, and again"—He paused. "I'm stopping with the Cranstouns, you know. She asked me down, and Kilmurray asked me to bring Coquette over."

He paused again. He had to answer the question in her blue eyes.

"I was on the box seat, and Bobbie Burns was driving, when we turned that sharp corner into St. Helier's barracks, and Bobbie fell under the coach, which literally passed over his back," Yelverton stammered. "Yet after a time he recovered. There seemed to be no difference in him, except that he had the loveliest color—just like a woman's—in his face, but years after, quite suddenly, he died. Ronny may recover and die like Burns did; there's no knowing. Miss de Salis is there," he added. "She arrived the day before I left."

"And did he mind?" cried Lesley, a hot color in her face flaring up jealously.

"He was too ill to mind," said Yelverton sadly.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

Lord Malincourt had found himself a good deal cut off from his kind, or rather such company as he liked, by Lesley's ill treatment of his friends, so that Yelverton came as a real boon to him and was speedily made very much at home in the place. And Lord Malincourt, with his cheery ways and robust personality, was like a refreshing tonic just then to Yelverton, whose kind, ugly face had grown sharp with anxiety during the past few weeks.

"Lassie," said her father one day, shaking his head at her, "I'm afraid here is another of them." To which Lesley responded:

"Dad, he was the only one of them all who didn't make love to me. That's why I'm so fond of him."

Lord Malincourt sighed ruefully. "It seems to me," he said, "that whether they make love to you or whether they don't your tender mercies are pretty much the same."

Lesley had set her teeth hard and pulled herself together so grandly that no one save Lady Cranstoun guessed the supreme effort it cost her. She was a little more particular over her hair and toilet, a little sharper with her tongue, she went more than ever among her poor, visited and received visits from the county and left no moment of the day idle if she could help it. It was only when at night she stretched out her limbs to rest that Ronny's face stole on her out of the darkness, not dead, not dead, thank God, but pallid with its love, blurred by agony, and then a woman's warm face filled the space beside him, drawing him with every hour farther away from chilly darkness into her own orbit of love and tender cherishing, and then the truth of Cynthia's cry that it were better to be Ronny's

dog than another man's foot rang in Lesley's ears, and the fires of jealousy blazed wildly up in her heart and for awhile made a madness in her brain.

He had given up expecting a word or kind message from her now, and so far as he knew she cared less than nothing for the state to which she had brought him. It would be to vitiate the whole spirit of her agreement with Cynthia to communicate in any way with him, argued Lesley, whose loyalty burned with so clear and pure a flame as to shrivel up all her own most passionate desires.

Yet through all her anguish ran like a silver thread the thought that he lived; that all was well, since the worst had not happened, and some day, some day, though perchance from afar off, she might look upon his dear face again.

Lord Malincourt had answered Jane Appuldurcombe's cruel letter in a manly, dignified way that had shamed her, though it could not lessen the abhorrence with which she regarded Lesley, and when Ronny, too, fiercely silenced her when she spoke of the girl, the mother fell back for comfort on Cynthia, who had perhaps the best reason to love Lesley of them all.

It was more on her own account than Cynthia's that Lady Appuldurcombe had sent for the girl, and to Ronny it mattered nothing, and less than nothing, as he lay all day in his darkened chamber taking no interest in anything but the post.

"Do you think she is ill, Yelverton?" he used to say to his faithful friend, who in those early August days seldom left him for long together. "She is very highly strung, and perhaps the news gave her a shock. And some brute or other (he little knew who the brute was) may have been making out it was her fault, when it was nothing of the sort."

Yelverton invented every possible excuse for Lesley's silence, which nevertheless he could not in the least understand.

If Ronny loved her and she him, what, then, was the hitch between them? Lesley had seemed to be the sort of girl to scorn appearances and fly straight to the man she loved in his hour of need, but was she, after all, the flinty hearted young woman her Somersetshire lovers one and all declared her to be?

"Perhaps it's Bob," said Ronny at last, when he had exhausted every conjecture as to her silence, but it so happened that one day Roger saw Sir Robert Heatherley's name among the arrivals at Homburg, so that anxiety at least was removed from Ronny's mind.

"Yelverton," said Ronny one day. "I want to get home—so does the poor mother. If I've got to lie on my back for the rest of my life, I can do it as well at home as in this grilling Sahara. Can't they move me somehow?"

"Yes," said Yelverton, "but not immediately; 'it will be another fortnight or so. These French doctors don't agree about your case, and want you to have English care. I shouldn't wonder, old chap, if you get up one of these days as well as ever you were—or at least!'"

"Oh, I know," said Ronny significantly. "Well, you're getting to look like a ghost, old man, and I want you to go home and execute a commission for me. Take Miss Coquette down to Malincourt and find out for me!"

"What a strange thing!" exclaimed Roger. "I got a letter this morning from Lady Cranstoun, who lives almost next door to Malincourt, begging me to go there for as long as I can. She says she sees Lesley every day."

Ronny's eyes, big in his cavernous face, flashed.

"Go, Roger," he cried, "go at once. And you'll write me, no—wire—what she—how she?"

And that was why Yelverton accepted an invitation that had at first greatly puzzled him, and in due course came to Malincourt.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

Lord Cranstoun did not in the least mind what his wife did, or who she received, so long as she expected neither his company nor his care, so when Roger Yelverton appeared he made himself fairly agreeable, and only smiled sardonically as he reflected on the agreeable contiguity of Cranstoun Hall and Malincourt. For it was Lesley, of course—he did not pay his wife the compliment of supposing she could attract any man now.

Lady Cranstoun looked up with keen interrogation at Roger one afternoon as he entered her boudoir, just returned from Malincourt. "Well?" she said, but Roger, sitting down near her, did not immediately answer, there being evidently full comprehension between the pair.

"What made her father send her to town?" he broke out suddenly. "To see her there in her own home and with him is to understand why she broke on us all like the very spirit of youth and joy, and look at her now!" he ended, with a groan.

"It was a huge mistake," said Lady Cranstoun, "and even I have found that for true happiness, sane enjoyment, you must look to the country, not town. Only you want one true heart beside you with which to enjoy it. And perhaps if Lesley had seen no one else she might have settled down happily with Heatherley—whose only curse is that he is a very rich man and so has been denied Ronny Kilmurray's chances of distinguishing himself."

"It is well that he used them," said Yelverton gloomily, "for they are over now. To linger on, half dead, with the woman you want out of your reach and the woman you don't want nursing you—I can't think of any more awful fate."

"He will get used to his nurse, and he will end by marrying her," said Lady Cranstoun bitterly. "One comfort is, Cynthia de Salis looks her worst in black. She needs the illumination of flesh."

This purely feminine gibe made

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Roger said, though his heart was heavy.

"How fond you are of Lesley," he said. "I can't call her anything else—to you. We started with clean breasts—you and I—and we must go on as we began."

Thus spake he in his man's ignorance, for Lady Cranstoun had told him nothing that he did not previously know and in no smallest way betrayed Lesley.

"I always knew," said Lady Cranstoun, "that you were her friend. And, believe me, I have done her no harm. I only taught her a little worldly wisdom



—in case she went out into the world—and evidently it was not enough, for she made enemies right and left by her straightforwardness."

"She did. Do you remember Lady Picton—a woman's club woman, who dresses like a man?"

"I know her. She looks like the picture of Dorian Gray. Did she go for Lesley?"

"Yes. Lesley openly shrank from her—and a few women of the Picton sort, and Dashwood and Kinski made a dead set at her. Lesley had done nothing but take a morning walk to Covent Garden which Malincourt had particularly enjoined on her, Ronny fell in with her, quite by accident, and Dashwood happened to see them and omit Ronny's name from the story—Ronny overheard him; hence the duel."

Lady Cranstoun's face showed wan as she leaned it against her white satin pillows. All this trouble had saddened her. She was a brown, lovely woman, hair and hazel eyes and skin all in most delicate gradations of color, and Roger's heart contracted as he looked at her, remembering that she had once been almost as gay and young and pure as Lesley's self.

"I love her," she said, answering his glance. "I did not know there was such a girl in the world till I found Lesley. Somehow it's like passionately desiring to find Christ and seeking him in vain on the hilltops, only to find his spirit at last animating a flower by the wayside." She colored and paused abruptly. What right had such words in her mouth?

"I can't understand it," said Yelverton. "She and Ronny quarreled incessantly at first. She always thought Ronny was sitting in judgment upon her and thoroughly disapproving of her in every way, and then they got to understand one another better, and—"

"His fame had a little to do with it," said Lady Cranstoun. "It's folly to say a woman's opinion of a man is not influenced by the world's verdict on him, and she was a little dazzled, like the rest. And he looks at and understands life as it is. He has lived it," she added, "not as monks live it in the cloister, listening for the sound of the dinner bell; not as we women endure it, barred out from realities, fed with untruths, closing our ears—if we would keep one shred of happiness—to the sea—that cry aloud to us from the other

side of the screen and will be heard, and it is such men as he who stamp their image on women as keen and quick to feel, as highly vitalized, as Lesley Malincourt."

"But what am I to say to him?" inquired Yelverton helplessly. "I have been here three days, and she simply won't hear me when I try to talk about him—only wants to know how his body is and won't send a crust of comfort to his starving soul. Have you no message for him? I said to her today. 'There is no message,' she said and walked away. And I must write to him this afternoon. I asked him to let me give her that letter he wrote before the duel, but he refused. He couldn't ask her to tie herself to a cripple, he said. He only wants a message—just a kind word or two. It's my belief he would begin to get well if he got it. But he's too proud to ask for it. I want to know where the hitch is. It can't be Cynthia de Salis. Hers is a twice told tale, and it can't be Lady Appuldurcombe, though she hates Lesley like poison. So what is it?"

But Lady Cranstoun either could not or would not tell.

Some wild thought of writing to Ronny and telling him the truth crossed her mind, but she must break her word to Lesley—and even if she could bring herself to do this evil that good might come, of what use would it be? For Lesley was fast bound by her promise—a promise from which only Cynthia could release her.

"Perhaps she isn't sure of her own mind after all," said Yelverton, who had been pursuing a different track of thought. "Half the love one hears of exists in the imagination alone. Fancy goes a long way in such matters."

"Oh, no!" said Lady Cranstoun positively. "Love may be the effect of imagination in absence, but not in actual presence—that is animal magnetism, pure and simple, the man's personality has set a torch to the girl's thoughts—her thoughts have not produced him."

Yelverton got up restlessly and looked out of a window.

"Have you seen Jem Churchill lately?" he said, quite forgetting, in his preoccupation, Lady Cranstoun's position in the county.

"Oh," she said dryly, "don't you know that the people about here are almost as provincial as the English who have lived in the east? And now if you don't mind looking up Cranstoun I think I must rest—perhaps doze awhile."

She closed her eyes, then opened them suddenly to see the look of kindest pity with which he regarded her as he opened the door to pass out.

"And some day," she said softly, "and may that day come soon—I shall forget to wake up, only I shall not be able to say as Maurice de Saxe did in dying: 'Doctor, life is only a dream. Mine has been short, but it has been a pleasant one!' For only a man could say that!"

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

CRANSTOUN HALL, Friday. DEAR OLD CHAP [wrote Yelverton in his round schoolboyish hand]—I brought Coquette down all right, and Miss Malincourt was delighted to see her. They make just as pretty a pair as ever. Lord Malincourt is awfully kind, and I spend a lot of time over there, and Lady Cranstoun is a great invalid, and Cranstoun and I don't cotton to one another at all. Miss Malincourt always inquires for you. She is very much altered, and I am sure feels your accident very much. Let me know if there is anything settled about your returning, and I will run up to town to meet you. Lord Malincourt has asked me to come over for the last. I like him immensely. Please refer me to your mother and Miss de Salis. Sincerely yours, ROGER YELVERTON.

"She is very much altered!" That was the only bit Ronny remembered out of all Roger's bald, halting sentences, and it brought comfort to his aching heart. Why was she altered if she did not care? He had not been at all sure

up to now that she did care, for a more elusive woman than Lesley did not live, and never more elusive than when you thought you had caught her, and then came thoughts to dash his comfort from him, for what if her father's and his mother's bullyings, following on the natural shock of his accident, might not be held accountable for any such change in her as Yelverton noticed?

She might have sent him one word—one little word—it would not have hurt her and what good would it not have done him!

He had been carried into the sitting room for the first time that day, as a sort of preparation for the move homeward to be made in a few days, and his mother had gone out to procure him some luxury, and only Cynthia was there, leaning her head against the woodwork of the open window, a cool and restful figure in her soft white gown.

Beneath the awning one saw all the arid desolation of Paris in August—Paris as she is under the commune, stripped of her royal robes, yet with her bubbling gaiety hardly quenched in her yet.

"Cynthia," he said in the tone of a brother who has no need to pretend to the friendliness that he and his sister are well aware of, "I have some news of Lesley at last."

"Of Lesley?" cried Cynthia, springing up, unable to keep the light out of her face that Lesley knew how to bring into so many, and it was a fact that Cynthia loved only one other person better in the whole world, and that was Ronny.

"Yelverton says that she is much altered," said Ronny, his gaunt face turned away from the light, so that he did not see the change in Cynthia's as she stood there, guilty, ashamed, thinking how Ronny would hate her if he knew the truth.

She had not written one line to Lesley—how could she? Having accepted that supreme sacrifice from the other woman, how could she seek her with fair words that meant nothing? For she knew now, or surely guessed, that Lesley had not parted lightly with a bauble that had never pleased her, but with her whole life treasure, else she, too, would have written. "It must have come as a great shock to her," she said dully, and then it suddenly occurred to Ronny, why, since the girls had been such friends, did they not correspond now?

Almost, not quite, he stumbled on the truth. Cynthia saw it dawning in his eyes, and exclaiming, "It is time for your medicine," brought it to him, lifting his head on her strong young arm as she did so in a matter of fact way that showed she had done so many times.

A little color came into his face as she gently laid him back, and he looked at her with the affection that had come gradually to replace his old dislike of her.

"Sit down here," he said, touching a seat near him, and she sat down, knowing what was expected of her, what would make her company sweet and desirable—that she should talk of Lesley.

They never talked of anything else, these two, when alone together—of what she had said, how she had looked, of the hundred and one things she had done in the brief season that had ended so disastrously, but save as his lovely cousin, of whom he was intensely proud, no word of her passed Ronny's lips.

And so it had come to pass that Cynthia was associated with the few bright hours of Ronny's illness, not his mother, to whom he dared not speak of Lesley—his mother, who had yet come to know that to nurse, to watch over, to cherish what one loves, even if you must lose it at last, is the divinest solace of human suffering vouchsafed to a