

The Elverton Tragedy.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

The windows were still unshuttered, and stopping in front of one she looked out.

"I cannot imagine what makes me so uneasy this evening," she thought, anxiously, as she rested her forehead against the cool window frame: "I feel as if—good Heavens! Who is that?"

Standing there in the darkness, her eyes had grown accustomed to the dim light, and she had suddenly become aware that a shrouded figure was moving cautiously along in the shelter of the shrubs which bordered the path on the further side of the lawn.

He eyes seemed glued to the figure until it vanished into the shrubbery.

He heart beat fast as she noticed how like the fugitive's walk was to that of her own daughter.

"How stupid I am!" she muttered impatiently. "Of course, it's one of the maids stealing out to meet her sweetheart. Most impudent of her to come this way, but I suppose she thought she was less likely to be caught here than if she had gone round the back way."

But in spite of all her assurances, the mother's heart was not at rest, and, turning suddenly, she went back to the adjoining room.

"After all, Garnett, I don't think I will dress just yet. It is rather early. You can go down; I will ring when I want you."

No sooner had Garnett retired than Lady Greyling made her way to Mabel's room.

She found the girl's things laid out, and her maid in attendance, but there was no sign of Mabel.

"I thought Miss Mabel had come up," she said in a surprised tone. "She takes so long to dress, you will never get her ready in time."

"Oh, yes, my lady; I think so! Miss Mabel is so much quicker than she used to be. I've noticed lately that she hardly ever comes up before half past six."

Lady Greyling turned and retraced her steps to her own room.

She did not doubt now that it was Mabel whom she had seen stealing away in the darkness, and realized that it could not be the first time she had kept tyrant with someone in the plantation, for it was rarely indeed that the girl had not slipped away from the drawing room when the clock struck six, declaring that she liked plenty of time to dress.

To find out certainly who was the man who was thus imperiling her daughter's good name was a matter of necessity, and catching up a long, dark cloak, Lady Greyling threw it over her arm and made her way down stairs, determined that, somehow or other, she, too, would escape from the house unseen.

She had just reached the edge of the plantation, and was wondering in which direction she would be most likely to find the fugitive, when the sound of footsteps close at hand warned her that she was on the right track.

Instantly she drew back, thinking it would be as well to make sure of the identity of the couple before she confronted them.

And she was not kept long in doubt. The pair halted within a few paces of where she stood, and she saw, with indignation, that the Italian's arm encircled her daughter's waist.

"I must go," Mabel said, as they came to a halt at the very edge of the plantation. "I had the narrowest shave of being caught last night. I had only just got to my room, and thrown myself down in a big chair by the fire when mother came in. Of course, I pretended to be half asleep, but I was frightened to death for fear she would notice how wet my shoes were; for she was so taken up with scolding Ellen for not coming up earlier to dress me, that she never noticed them."

"Poor Ellen!" She was rather in a fix, for I've told her a dozen times I won't have her come till I ring for her. However, she had sense enough to hold her tongue, and take her scolding meekly. Still, I guess she won't wait for me to ring to-night, so there's twice as much chance of my being missed."

"Then, I suppose, I must let you go," replied the Italian, with a sigh. "Ah, carina! if you knew how long the days are when I do not see you!"

"But you always do," laughed Mabel. "Ah! for how short a time! Just for a half-minute—a word, a kiss, and you are gone. Oh, carissima! if you knew—"

"I know if I don't run away directly I shall be found out," interrupted Mabel. "And then, with a hurried embrace, the two parted."

Meanwhile, the silent watcher had stood rooted to the ground, unable to decide what would be her best course.

She knew well enough that a girl is never so set on any course as when she believes her friends are all against it—that opposition is fuel to the fire, which would have died out had it been left unnoticed, and she feared lest open interference should make Mabel still more bent on having her own way.

She was still uncertain how to act, when Mabel tore herself from her lover's embrace and ran lightly off.

The Italian promptly retraced his steps through the plantation, and, unseen by either, Lady Greyling returned to the house.

Before her toilet was half completed, Mabel passed along the corridor on her way down.

She was trilling a lowly little French chanson, and Lady Greyling was strangely

uneasy as she listened.

She thought that a girl must have sunk very low before she could seem so happy, so free from anxiety, while she was playing such a double part, and deceiving the parents whose only desire was for her happiness.

She congratulated herself that she had found out what was going on, and determined that before twenty-four hours were over, Mabel should be safely out of harm's way.

CHAPTER V. THE SECOND BEST.

Signor Delmonti spent the whole of the following day in his own rooms, working hard on the sketches which he had promised to prepare for Sir Joseph's inspection, and without which he had to excuse for presenting himself at the Towers.

He had intended to walk over at twilight on the chance of securing a brief interview with Mabel; but late in the afternoon it began to rain so heavily, that, very reluctantly, he had to abandon his intention.

When he presented himself at the Towers the next morning, he was promptly admitted to Sir Joseph's presence, and it struck him there was a change in that gentleman's attitude towards him, though in what it consisted he would have found it hard to define.

He had an uneasy feeling that something was amiss—a feeling which did not lessen when luncheon was announced, and he found himself tete-a-tete with Sir Joseph.

"I shall not have the pleasure of seeing Lady Greyling," he said, interrogatively, as soon as they were alone. "I was hoping to have her opinion of my sketches. Perhaps to-morrow—"

"I think not—in fact—after a moment's pause—"my wife left the Towers yesterday, and I do not intend her to return for some time to come. This dull, damp weather is most depressing, and I am sure she is better away. My present intention is to join her as soon as I can get off, so I hope you will not think me discourteous if I ask you to complete the medallions as soon as possible."

Signor Delmonti bowed in silence, and did his best to hide his anger.

"Found out!" he thought, savagely, "and that chance gone! Well, it's a blessing Lady Greyling had the sense not to make a fuss or tell the old boy. It will be fifty pounds in my pockets, and that will enable me to open the campaign in Elverton in style. Lucky thing I didn't have a split with Lydia the other night. Under the circumstances, I had better settle things up with her—that is, if it's really all right about her legacy. It won't do to run any risks about that, for a country doctor isn't likely to be able to do much for his daughter. It would have been a very different matter if I'd managed to secure the charming Mabel. For his own sake, Sir Joseph would have had to give us enough to keep things going in tolerable comfort; however, it's no use crying over spilt milk. I'll run up to London and have a look in at Somerset House, before I go to Elverton. If that money does really come to Lydia, unreservedly, on her marriage, why—I might do worse."

Meanwhile, Lydia, never dreaming that, in the artist's eye, she was but a second string to his bow, was thinking more and more of the days when she should share the glories of her lover's ancestral home, and puzzling Bessie Wilmer with veiled references to her future grandeur.

"How you can contemplate marrying and settling down in poky little Elverton, I can't think," she said disdainfully, as the two girls walked briskly across the common, a week or two after her return from Woodford. "I am sure, when I came home, and mother told me it was just settled you should marry Mr. Armitage, I could hardly believe it."

"I don't see why," returned Bessie, with some heat. "We've known each other for three years, ever since he came into father's office."

"But he's so old," objected Lydia, catching at the first idea which suggested itself, since she could hardly speak out her thoughts, and saw how small looked the dignity of a professional man's wife, compared to the grandeur to which she aspired.

"Barely thirty," laughed Bessie, "and," drawing herself up with a little air of pride, "it that is all the fruit you can find with Ted, I think I'm a lucky girl, Lydia."

"But to be tied to Elverton as you must be, since Mr. Armitage is to be your father's partner—the very thought is enough to give one the blues. When I marry, I mean to rise, to see life to be somebody, to be admired, envied—"

Bessie laughed merrily. "When love comes to you, Lydia, you will be like other women, and find your happiness in your husband's home. As it one would care two straws for the world's praise as long as he were pleased."

A mocking retort was on Lydia's lips, but it was never uttered.

Coming towards them was a lithe erect figure which, even at the first glance Lydia recognized.

Her first feeling was one of exultation. How soon he had kept his promise, and come to Elverton, drawn thither by his love for her!

For a moment her heart beat high with triumph, and the rich color rushed into her cheeks; then, with a strong effort, she subdued all signs of feeling, and spoke to Bessie in as light a tone as she could assume.

"By the way, Bess, you remember Signor Cavatini's friend! Did I tell you I met him often at the Greylings', and got to know him quite well?"

"What a strange coincidence!"

"Wasn't it? And here's another just as strange. Come out of your day-dreams, my dear, and look straight ahead. Unless my eyes deceive me, he is coming towards us at this very moment. I wonder if he is staying in Elverton? He was talking to grandfather about making sketches in the neighborhood."

Which was pure fiction on Lydia's part; but it served her end, for it made Bessie believe the Italian was on as good terms at Woodford Rectory as Lydia had assured that he was at Greyling Towers.

And when Signor Delmonti had greeted Miss Strong with due courtesy, and, having been introduced to her companion, had turned and walked beside the two girls, his very first remarks went to prove the truth of Lydia's statement.

He expressed his regret that her grandmother had seemed greatly fatigued by her holiday, declared the rector looked quite dull now there was no lively young granddaughter to enliven him, and spoke of Greyling Towers as though he had almost lived there.

To this last remark Lydia had vouchsafed no reply, and almost casually the artist had gone on to add that Lady Greyling had been so far from well again that she and her daughter had left, the week before.

Then he turned the conversation to the beauties of Elverton, and talked so pleasantly that Bessie decided he would be quite an acquisition to the little town.

"You will come in and see mother?" said Lydia as the trio reached the doctor's gate. "She will be pleased to see any friend of Lady Greyling's," she added with a quick glance at the artist, which conveyed a distinct warning. "And you, Bess—you have not been in all this week."

"I am afraid I must not stay now. Mother will be wanting me."

"And with a bow and a smile, Bessie departed."

Apparently, Signor Delmonti had quite understood Lydia's mute warning, for he talked to Mrs. Strong entirely of the Towers, and never hinted at the fact that he had ever seen her own parents.

Had he done so, Mrs. Strong would have been certain to make an opportunity to write to them respecting him.

As it was, she took him entirely on trust, feeling that the man who was so intimate at Greyling Towers must be quite a fit and proper person to be numbered amongst her own visitors.

Dr. Strong, however, thought differently. He took a violent dislike to the Italian, and spoke out a great deal more plainly than was his wont.

"I don't care if he were born and bred as Greyling Towers," he said, when his wife remarked on his intimacy with the Greylings as a proof of his respectability. "I associated entirely with English people."

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don't like the man, and I will not have him in my house."

"You can't shut the door in his face," objected Mrs. Strong; "or, if you do," she added, hurriedly, forestalling the remark her husband was about to make, "you will only make people talk."

"I don't care whether they talk or not, provided they have no reason to do it," said the doctor sharply. "He's just the sort of fellow to make an impression on a girl of Lydia's temperament, so you had better keep him at a distance. He will soon drop off if you don't encourage him to come here."

Lydia was very indignant when she heard her father's veto, but much too shrewd to give any hint as to her real feelings.

As soon as she saw her lover, she begged him to proclaim his true status.

But Signor Delmonti would not hear of it. "Not yet, carissima. We must have patience, I cannot go to your father while I have but my own earnings to depend on. It is only natural that, remembering you will have a little money when you are eighteen—"

"If you would only tell him who you are, he could not imagine that my poor little income could have any weight with you," interrupted Lydia, in a vexed tone. "You surely don't mean that, for the next three years, we must go on like this—just a stolen meeting now and again, a chance encounter in the town."

"There is only one way to prevent it," said the Italian, bending towards her and whispering something into her ear.

Lydia crimsoned, then drew back and looked up at him wistfully.

"But father would be so angry," she faltered, "and I don't see what difference that would make."

"You little goose"—and the Italian slipped his arm round her waist and drew her to him—"don't you see that, when once you are my very own, I can tell the doctor without fear. He may scold, but he cannot separate. He can't even keep your money from you, for according to the terms of your godmother's will it must come to you on your marriage. And I, though it will pain me to think my beautiful countess will have to wait before she can assume the rank which will be hers by marriage, yet I shall console myself by thinking how surprised people will be when they discover that the poor artist's bride has become a grand lady, whose lightest wishes will be law to the adoring husband whom she honored with her love in the days of his obscurity."

Swayed alike by love and vanity, it was only to be expected that Lydia, listening to Delmonti's specious flattery and honeyed words, should feel her objections to the course he proposed gradually disappearing.

Before they separated, it had been arranged that, as soon as Lydia's eighteenth birthday was past, she should pay a long talked-of visit to an aunt in London.

"We shall be quite safe in a place like that," the Italian said in a satisfied tone, "and it is not such a very long way from here, when all is said and done. I can take rooms there, and divide my time between the two places. It would not do to be away from Elverton altogether during your absence, or some meddling busybody might connect the two facts."

As Lydia walked slowly home, it struck her how greatly Delmonti's English had improved since that August day when she had made his acquaintance; but she promptly decided that it must be owing to the fact that from that time onward, he had associated entirely with English people.

CHAPTER VI. ON THE EVE OF SUCCESS.

It is a well known axiom that "great events from trivial causes spring," and certainly the fact that Sir Joseph sprained his ankle seemed a very trifling thing to affect the course of three lives.

Yet so it was. Lady Greyling felt she must return to the Towers at once; but, knowing the artist was still in the village, and that of necessity Mabel would be left more than ever to her own devices, and would be able to meet him without let or hindrance, she bethought herself of an elderly cousin living at Brighton, and wrote asking her to take charge of Mabel for the next few weeks.

At first, Mabel rebelled at not being allowed to return to the Towers, but it suddenly occurred to her that Cousin Margaret would never dream of scrutinizing her correspondence, and that, at Brighton, she would be able to write to, and hear from, Signor Delmonti freely; whereupon she appeared to change her mind, and consented to stay with Mrs. Delaine until Sir Joseph was able to leave the Towers.

And so it came about, one brilliant autumn morning, that a letter, redirected on from Woodford, was brought to Signor Delmonti, at his lodgings at Elverton.

It was an innocent missive enough, and, had its contents been made public, they could not have raised a breath of scandal.

'Marsh House, Brighton.

DEAR SIGNOR BELMONTI,—it ran—"You were kind enough once to offer to lend me a little Italian sketch to copy. If you will send it to me here I have plenty of time to copy it, as I am staying with an ancient cousin who does not care to go out much so that I have plenty of time on my hands."

Yours sincerely,
'M. G.'

The Italian chuckled as he read it. There never had been any talk of his lending her a sketch and he quite understood she had merely invented the idea as an excuse for writing to him, and telling him of her whereabouts.

"Well, I'm about tired of this place he muttered. 'A week or two at Brighton will suit me to the ground. I will write to Mabel and tell her I shall be in the neighborhood to-morrow. Perhaps on the whole, I had better assure the fair Lydia that London is my destination, then she will believe it is business that calls me away. I must keep in with her till I've made sure of the other girl. There is no doubt Mabel is the best catch, for Sir Joseph would never have the heart to let his only daughter come to want, and, though, Lydia's money is safe enough, it would not last very long.'

Lady Greyling would hardly have left Mabel so happily had she guessed the very first use the girl would make of her comparative freedom would be to summon the Italian to her side.

That he should obey the summons was a forgone conclusion, and from that time Mabel's ingenuity was exercised in devising opportunities of meeting her lover opportunities of which he made such good use that within a fortnight he had persuaded her to have their names put up at a registry office.

But just as he felt himself on the verge of success all his plans were upset.

Mrs. Delaine received a telegram one morning, and surprised Mabel by saying they must leave Brighton immediately.

"My sister-in-law has met with a serious accident," she explained. "I must go to her at once, and, as I can neither leave you here, nor spare anyone to take you home, you must accompany me to Elverton. I should like to leave by the eleven o'clock train, so you had better run up and help Susan to pack your things."

But Mabel's first thought when she reached her own room was to write to her lover apprising him of her hurried departure.

She dared not give the note to one of the servants to post; but, at the station, managed to elude her cousin's observation and entrust it to a friendly porter, who forgot all about the task entrusted to him till he went off duty that night.

Could Mabel have seen and heard the Italian the next morning when he received her letter, she would have blessed the accident which had prevented their marriage.

However, he calmed down at last, and took the next train to London, where he remained for a few days before returning to Elverton.

He knew Miss Delaine's place well—a rambling, old-fashioned house on the edge of a common.

There would be little difficulty in meeting Mabel there without attracting attention, especially as Mrs. Delaine would be so much occupied with her sister.

He determined to lose no more time, and obtained a special licence while in town.

Armed with this he anticipated little difficulty in inducing Mabel to elope with him.

That the old schoolfellows, thrown together again so unexpectedly, would meet fairly open he felt certain; but he had so impressed on each the necessity of secrecy, that he had no fear either would even hint at the fact that she contemplated a speedy union with himself.

But there are times when even the most cautious girl will throw aside her veil of reserve, and such a one came to Lydia Strong one sunny morning, as she and Mabel were walking towards the common together.

Miss Greyling had gone into the town with an old servant, but meeting Lydia, had left the maid to do her shopping alone.

"You do look bright this morning, Lydia," she remarked, surveying her friend critically. "Has anything happened?"

"Something is going to happen," laughed Lydia. "Have you forgotten I shall be eighteen to-morrow!"

"I don't see why that should make you so jubilant."

Lydia laughed and blushed. "Well, I don't mind telling you," she

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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