

With Serpent Guile.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER V. CONTINUED.

"Come, you must tell me," Sir Gavin said, in the masterful tones she always felt so powerless to resist. "Was it in any way connected with me?"

"With you! How could it be?" exclaimed Osla, with pretended surprise. "But, if you must know," she added, desperately, "aunt and I had a disagreement, and—and—we thought it would be better to part."

"And you will not tell me any more, eh, Osla?"

"There is no more to tell, Gavin." Then, after a moment's silence: "I am so glad you have forgiven me for my strange conduct that night. I was afraid I had offended you past all pardon."

"I think it was I who ought to have sought your forgiveness, child. I behaved to you like a brute. If I had not been a senseless ass, I should not have gone as I did without a full explanation. I was very near returning; only, the Douglas pride kept me away."

"I am very glad it did," Osla cried, with a little shiver, as she thought of the terrible risk he would have run.

"Then you would not have cared to see me?"

"I did not mean that. I meant—I thought—"

"She stopped; how could she speak while he looked at her like that?"

"You silly child! do you think you can deceive me just as you like?" Sir Gavin said, coming nearer to her. "Why don't you say that it was for my own sake that you wished me to keep away? I have had a talk with Marjory about the breaking of that cream jug, and what she said about your aunt made me suspect that I was in considerable danger just then. Tell me the truth. Did you let it fall by accident?"

Osla could not tell him a direct lie, and she was obliged to reply in the negative.

"Ah! and what was in it? I had no idea that my esteemed relative dabbled in such arts. Did she intend to make an end of me, or only to drug me and get the money she wanted?"

"Please don't ask me any more; I can't tell you Gavin," replied Osla with a shudder.

"Well, we'll let it drop if it distresses you," Sir Gavin answered, gently. "But now I want to talk to you on another subject; one I have wished to speak to you of ever since I came here; only I have never found you alone before. You don't think I shall let you remain here do you?"

"Not remain here! Oh! why not, Gavin?" He noticed with a feeling of intense pleasure, that she made no attempt to question his right to interfere. "Why do you wish me to leave? Surely it would be unwise to throw up so good an engagement?"

"But, if I could tell you of one which would suit you better, would not that influence you, Osla?"

"Yes, perhaps," she replied, slowly. "But would it not seem unfair to Lady Hamilton?"

"You silly child!" he said, putting his hand caressingly on hers as it lay on the table near him. "Don't you see that your being here is purely a matter of business on both sides? Lady Hamilton would not wish you to stay if you did not suit her, and, therefore, it cannot be unfair if you leave because—as the maids say—you wish to better yourself."

"I suppose you are right, Gavin," returned Osla, with a sigh. "But I don't see how I can do better. And I should not like to find myself obliged to take a lower salary."

"You mercenary little creature!" laughed the baronet. "However, I can promise you shall not have less. I intended to speak to you about this when I was at the Red House; only, I made a fool of myself instead."

"You shall not say that!" put in Osla, quickly.

"It is the truth, anyway," he replied.

grimly. "However, if you are willing to overlook my folly, I will not refer to it again, as it is certainly a rather humiliating subject. Osla, can't you guess what kind of situation it is I want you to take?" he added, coming close to her side.

"I—I don't know," faltered the girl looking helplessly into the handsome face so near her own.

She hardly dared hope that she could read it aright, and that he cared for her.

Sir Gavin looked tenderly for a moment at the pale face, and then, suddenly putting his arm round her, he drew her to his heart, saying as he bent his head till his lips almost touched her cheek: "I think you do, dear; you know that I want to provide for your future—that I want you to be dependent on no one but me. You will consent, will you not, little one? You will be—"

The door opened suddenly, and Osla had only just time to escape from his embrace before Mabel Sinclair came in.

But her crimson face, together with the extreme annoyance exhibited by Sir Gavin, left the intruder in no doubt as to what was passing.

Was she too late?—had he already proposed to his cousin, or was he only about to do so?

Mabel asked herself this, with a fierce pang of jealousy.

She must find out, and, utterly regardless of all delicacy, she said, with a loud laugh—

"I declare you looked as though you were rehearsing a love scene. Positively, if I had not known what old friends you two are, I should have feared I was de trop."

"How can you talk like that, Miss Sinclair?" murmured Osla, with a look of distress, while Sir Gavin turned away towards the window, too much disgusted at Mabel's coarse pleasantry to speak at all.

But she was satisfied the dreaded proposal had not been made, or the baronet would not have kept silence; and very soon afterwards, under pretence of asking Osla's advice about some lace, she contrived to get her out of the room, leaving Sir Gavin to rail at his folly in not having put the momentous question to the girl he loved, instead of wasting the precious moments in talking of other things.

CHAPTER VI.

For the two ensuing days, Sir Gavin could find no opportunity of resuming that interrupted conversation.

But Osla was not impatient; she trusted him entirely, and had quite enough to occupy her in thinking of her new and wholly unexpected happiness.

Gavin had asked her to be his wife!

It was almost too wonderful to believe.

She was thinking of the glorious future before her, while she sat h-ping little Barbara to finish a handkerchief eachet she was making as a Christmas present for her mother, when suddenly the child said—

"Miss Graham, darling, do you think Sir Gavin is going to marry Aunt Mabel?"

"Pshaw! nonsense!" replied Osla, with a thrill of indignation that anyone should dare to say such things of the man who had asked her to be his, "and it was very wrong of her to speak to you on such a subject at all," she added, gravely.

"She didn't say it to me, Miss Graham. She was talking to aunt's maid, and Honorine said she had been expecting it, for they were always together."

"Well, never mind, dear; they were very silly to talk like that, and you must not take any notice of such things. Now, run and find Yolande, and tell her to come and help with this work while I read some more of that fairy tale to you."

Later in the day, when she was sitting alone in the schoolroom, she received a visit from Miss Sinclair, who had excused herself from accompanying the other ladies to the ice on the plea of slight indisposition.

But her real reason was quite different—she had found out that Osla intended to remain at home, and she feared lest Sir Gavin might return to the house and meet her alone.

Also she had a scheme of her own to carry out.

"I am quite tired of my own society, and have come to inflict myself on you, Miss Graham—that is, if you will allow me to invade your domain," she said, laughingly, as she came in.

Osla would far rather have been alone, but, of course, she could not make her visitor welcome.

"It is a very pleasant room, agreed Osla. After a little more talk on different topics, Mabel said, in her most winning manner—

"I want you to do something to please me, Miss Graham. Will you do it?"

"You must tell me what it is first, please, Miss Sinclair," smiled Osla.

"How cautious you are! Do you think I am hatching a plot against the state, and want you to become my accomplice? But don't be afraid; it is nothing very dreadful. Janet has been telling me that you decline to come to our ball next week, and I want you, as a very great favor to me, to reconsider your decision."

"It is very kind of you to wish it, Miss Sinclair, but I fear I cannot."

"But why will you not come? Janet cannot bear the idea of your spending the time in solitude while we are enjoying our-

selves."

"Oh, I shall be quite happy; and a grand ball like that is hardly for a dependent like me," Osla said, quietly, but firmly.

"What nonsense! You really must come! Now do, please, be reasonable, dear."

At last, Osla was forced to give way to her persuasions.

"Ah, that is right!" cried Miss Sinclair, approvingly. "I was beginning to think I must mention someone else's wishes—as an additional inducement; though, I must confess, she went on, with a little self-conscious laugh, and a significant glance at Osla, 'that I felt just a wee bit jealous that he should have been so very anxious I should succeed in my mission.'"

"I really do not know to whom you allude," Miss Sinclair, said Osla, somewhat stiffly.

"Don't you really?" asked Mabel, with a simper. "I speak of Sir Gavin."

"Do you mean that he asked you to persuade me to be present?" inquired Osla, with a rising color.

"Yes, he did indeed, dear."

Miss Sinclair told the lie unblushingly.

All that Sir Gavin had said on the subject was, that he hoped Osla would alter her mind.

Osla remained silent.

What did it mean? she was asking herself. Why should Gavin commission this girl to tell her his wishes when he might so easily have done it himself?

Miss Sinclair noticed the pain and perplexity on her rival's face, but, concealing her delight, she said, suavely—

"But perhaps you don't care for dancing? You don't think it wrong, I hope?"

"Not at all. I like it very well, but I have never danced much."

"I will undertake that you shall do plenty next week, then," promised Miss Sinclair. "You shall dance every dance. I will tell Janet to see that you do not lack partners, and I will make Sir Gavin dance two or three with you."

"You are very kind, Miss Sinclair, but perhaps he will not care to be disposed of like that."

Osla spoke coldly.

"Oh! but he will; he will do anything I ask him," was the audacious reply. "You must have seen that, Miss Graham."

Osla felt as if an iron hand were crushing all life from her heart as she listened to this assertion.

Could it be true?

Was it possible that there could be any foundation for the servile gossip which Barbara had repeated to her?

No; she would not believe it.

Gavin was not the man to play with a woman's affections; and had he not asked her to be his wife?

But suddenly it flashed across her that he had not done this; he had told her he loved her, and asked her to trust her future to his care.

Was it only a brother's love he felt for her, and did he only intend to offer to provide for her so that she might not have to work for her living?

Yes, she saw it all now; this was what he meant, and her love for him had led her into this mistake.

She must conceal her folly at all costs, and she remarked, with a calmness which surprised herself—

"You are engaged to Gavin, then, I suppose, Miss Sinclair? I wonder he has not told me."

Mabel blushed, and looked somewhat confused; this direct question was decidedly awkward.

"Now, that is too bad!" she said, resolving to put a bold face on it. "You make me feel ashamed of having said so much; but, after all it is nonsense for a girl to pretend she does not know when a man loves her. Still, I must confess we are not actually engaged; but he has said enough for me to be certain of his intentions."

Janet and everybody quite understood; but, of course, this in confidence. I would not, for the world, have him know what I have said—a woman must always pretend innocence to a man, or he will not like it. You know what I mean, don't you dear?"

"I shall not be likely to tell him, Miss Sinclair."

"I knew I might trust you," came the answer, in effusive tones. "Gavin has often told me what a staunch friend you are." Then, finding Osla had no remark to offer, Miss Sinclair rose from her chair, saying: "Now I must run away, or I shall not have time to get my hair done before Janet and the rest come home."

She was about to leave the room when she stopped suddenly exclaiming—

"There! I have been talking so much

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of Gavin that I quite forgot one of my chief reasons for coming here. This is your birthday, is it not? Yolande told me it was."

"Yolande is a little chatterbox, I must warn her not to talk so much. She discovered the interesting fact when she was looking at a book of mine the other day," explained Osla, unwillingly.

"Then you will let me offer you my best wishes, and this trifle as a keepsake, will you not?"

As she spoke Mabel drew a small morocco case from her pocket and placed it in Osla's hand.

The latter was by no means willing to accept a present from Gavin's future wife, but she could not refuse without positive rudeness; and so, murmuring her thanks, she opened the case and displayed a ring of curious and striking workmanship.

"This is far too costly for me," she said, as she gazed on the flashing gems of which it was composed.

"Indeed it is not," returned the giver, decidedly. "Nothing can be too good for Gavin's cousin, and you must keep it; otherwise I shall think you do not like the idea of my being his wife."

"You must not think that," put in Osla, hastily.

"Then you must promise to wear my ring. Let me put it on,"—and taking Osla's hand she placed the ring on her finger. Now I really must be off," she added, and almost ran out of the room.

As soon as she was gone, Osla sank into a chair and tried to think.

But it was impossible, with that cruel pain gnawing at her heart; she could only feel.

She had but one consolation—that she had been prevented from betraying her love to Gavin; if Miss Sinclair had not entered the library so opportunely, she would have done so, and what would he have thought?

She sat there, lonely, stricken, and ashamed, till a little bustle on the stairs, and the opening and shutting of doors told her it was time to dress for dinner, and then she went wearily to her own room.

When she entered the dining room, later, the conspicuous ring still flashed on her finger.

CHAPTER VII.

The next day, there was a shooting-party—the largest of the season—and all the gentlemen, as well as many of the ladies—Mabel Sinclair among these—left the house at a very early hour.

The coverts to be beaten were those beyond the moor, and it was nearly dusk when the sportsmen returned.

The ladies at once went to the drawing-room to have tea, but most of the gentlemen partook of stronger refreshments in the gun-room, and then the whole party trooped upstairs to prepare for dinner.

Sir Gavin was a few minutes behind the others, and Osla heard him talking with unusual seriousness to Yolande as he came along.

Just as they were opposite the school-room door she heard him say—

"Now, postman, attend to your duties, and, a moment after, the child, screaming with laughter, rushed into the room, and handed her a note.

What had Gavin to write about? Were things settled between him and Miss Sinclair, and did he mean to inform her of it thus? Osla asked herself as she tore it open.

It was very short, only a few lines:

"MY DEAR LITTLE GIRL,—Will you contrive to be in the library about half-past eight? and I will come to you when we mean leave the dining room. I have tried all I know to get you to myself, but I can not, and I want your answer to the question I had just put to you the other day when Mabel Sinclair interrupted us. I want to hear you say it, dear. You see I am making very sure what it will be, but I am so vain that I cannot think you will refuse."

"Yours ever,"

"G. DOUGLAS."

Osla kissed the precious writing again and again, but one the less was she determined not to grant Sir Gavin's request; she would never be alone with him again if she could help it.

It was kind of him to wish to provide for her, but she could not accept his charity and she doubted if she had strength to resist his persuasions.

An even greater fear oppressed her—

she was alarmed lest she might betray her secret.

She would not go down to dinner at all, she decided, and, as soon as she had schooled herself into composure, she went to Lady Hamilton's room to ask her to excuse her.

Sir Gavin smiled when he noted her absence.

"Silly little thing! she is shy about meeting me before the others," he thought tenderly.

But when he found she was not in the library, and after waiting an hour, still she did not come, he was both pained and disappointed.

Surely he could not have been deceiving himself.

No Osla was not the girl to permit a man to say love words to her, if she did not return his love.

There must be some mistake.

As soon as he returned to the drawing-room, Mabel beckoned to him, and made room for him on the couch, at her side.

She had been waiting impatiently for him that she might play her trump card.

"I was wondering where you were, Sir Gavin," she remarked, innocently.

"I have been in the library, and I did not flatter myself I should be missed," he replied.

"You knew better than that," murmured Mabel, meaningly.

Sir Gavin took no notice of this. He was not ignorant of her preference for him, but he had never encouraged it, and, just now, his whole thoughts were of Osla.

It was no easy matter to keep up an indifferent conversation, and, at last, he said—

"Is Osla unwell, Miss Sinclair, do you know? I do not see her, and she was not at dinner."

"I daresay she does not feel in spirits for company this evening, poor girl," returned the traitress, with pretended sympathy.

"What has happened?" questioned Sir Gavin, anxiously.

Have you forgotten that Percy Carleton, the rector's son, went away this afternoon?"

"But what of that? How does it concern my cousin, Miss Sinclair?"

"Don't you know? I am sorry I mentioned it, but I did not think she would have kept it secret from you, though I knew it was not to be publicly announced just yet."

Mabel spoke with affected annoyance.

"Please explain. I really don't understand," said Sir Gavin, with impatience.

"She is engaged to him, you know," Mabel said, demurely.

"What! Osla engaged to that fool! It is impossible!" exclaimed Sir Gavin, incredulously.

"Now, you are too hard on him," Mabel cried, reprovingly. "If he is not always very wise, I am sure he has shown himself so in the choice of a wife. Miss Graham is charming."

Sir Gavin felt too much bewildered to speak, and she went on—

"He has gone to the Cape, where a distant relative of Mrs. Carleton has offered him a good appointment in connection with some mining business. He has behaved very well, for he held back from Miss Graham till he got it, though, of course, everyone could see what his feelings were. I think it was so nice of him not to try to bind her to him while he had no prospects."

"Matters were only definitely settled between them a day or two ago, and yesterday he brought her a lovely engagement ring; did you not notice it last night? If all goes as they hope, she is to go out to him in about two years' time. You seem quite surprised."

"I am very much surprised," Sir Gavin answered, sternly.

"Well, it is strange she has not told you, said Mabel.

"Very strange, I think, though of course I am not her guardian." Mabel was delighted at his evident anger; things were going just as she wished them.

But she hid her triumph, and went on, with pretended anxiety—

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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