

## Her Ladyship's

Secret.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS—PART II.

Presently a quiet double knock called the butler forth from his pantry. He answered it promptly.

'It is the companion, I suppose,' as he opened the door to a tall woman dressed in deep mourning. 'Don't like the looks of her,' was his mental comment as he ascended the stairs. 'She must be got rid of; might have a bad influence on my lady.'

He ushered her into the breakfast-room, and formally repeated Lady Garnet's message, and asked her if she would like a cup of tea.

'No, thank you,' replied the new comer. 'I shall be obliged if you will send a maid to show me my bedroom.'

'Certainly, miss, and I will have your luggage sent up at once.'

Ketha wondered at the decided tone of authority which the butler affected, then, being left alone, she sat down to wait till someone else should come to her.

It was a cold reception, so unlike what she had expected of the gracious mannered sympathetic woman who had welcomed her with real friendliness only yesterday.

'There may be some mistake, or perhaps she is out, and the servant has invented the message. And yet why should it not be true after all? What am I in this house but a hired companion, paid to amuse, as a maid who receives wages for service? I must be less than-skinned or I shall prepare for myself untold bitterness of heart.' And she quickly dried her eyes, and tried to think she was going to be very happy.

And she soon forgot her grievance when early the next morning her ladyship came into her bedroom, and spoke to her so pleasantly, offering a thousand excuses for her apparent neglect of Miss Mackenzie on the previous evening.

'The fact was, my dear child, I had one of my atrocious headaches. You know I am not at all strong, and ever since the shock which my poor husband's death caused me, I cannot stand the least worry or excitement. So you'll forgive me, won't you?'

And Cora held out a little plump white hand, with a pretty pleading gesture, so that simple, unsophisticated Ketha fell fathoms deep in love with her at once.

She looked so lovely in her delicate pink wrapper, with the wide lace ruffles at the neck, and then she was so friendly and unaffected.

Ketha had to learn that no nature is so tyrannical as that which is governed by caprice. Before another week passed she had experienced the bitterness of being one day caressed and brought forward, on the next snubbed and set aside—in fact, not seldom ignored. An April sky is very beautiful and a wanderer on the world's highway would scarcely choose to travel under such a heaven.

One afternoon, about six weeks after Ketha's arrival in Harley street, Lady Garnet sat in her boudoir with her feet on the fender, and her elbows on her knees. A novel lay open on the rug with a lace bordered handkerchief and a paper knife. She looked the picture of ennui and discontent, and took not trouble to suppress the yawns which considerably annoyed and wearied her companion, who sat by the window sewing some embroidery round one of her ladyship's skirts.

Cora glanced at her several times rather impatiently. She hated to see others work when she herself was idle.

'Oh, you dear good creature, do put away that sewing; my nerves are all on edge to night, and the click of that needle irritates me.'

Miss Mackenzie laid aside her task obediently, and crossing her hands in her lap, lay back in her chair and gave herself up to retrospective thoughts.

'How dark it is,' remarked Cora; 'and we have not had tea. It can't be five o'clock yet. Oh, dear, dear me, Ketha, widowhood is dull work. I long to go out in the world again. I shall be able to leave off some of this dreadful crape next season, don't you think so?'

'I hardly know, really, Lady Garnet. You see I am so ignorant of the ways of the world,' was the companion's reply.

The fact was, her ladyship's tone jarred on Ketha's sense of delicacy, besides which that remark was scarcely in accordance with one Cora had made only that very morning, when, in looking at her dead husband's portrait she had said: 'Ah, Miss Mackenzie, one loves but once in a lifetime, and when death steps in between two hearts that beat in unison, what is life but a foretaste, a beginning of death; what is the world thenceforward but a strange country where all those who meet one speak in an unknown tongue?'

'I wish someone would call,' said Lady Garnet with another yawn which quite distorted her pretty little mouth, and almost before the wish was spoken the drawing-room door was thrown open, and Plush announced a visitor, at the same time bringing in the lamp.

Ketha had no caught the name, being at the other end of the room, but as she turned and raised her head, the light fell on her own face, and, at the same time, on another which she recognized only too well.

So unexpected and sudden had been the meeting, that Ketha had not a moment to

hide her surprise.

'Oh, Captain Cameron,' she exclaimed, while her eyes grew suddenly soft and radiant.

'Miss Scott, I have found you at last. Where have you been hiding yourself?'

'There must be some mistake here,' remarked the hostess coldly: 'this lady is—at least, she has given me to understand that her name is Mackenzie. But you seem to know each other very well. You did not tell me you were acquainted with Captain Cameron, Miss Mac—I beg your pardon—Miss Scott.'

'I never heard your ladyship mention his name, therefore it would have been very uncalculated for if I had done so.'

'I was a friend of Miss Scott's father Lady Garnet, and at the time of his terrible trouble I was anxious to render any service I could to him and his daughter; but when I returned to Scotland, I found him dead, and Miss Scott had gone away no one knew whither. Naturally I was surprised to meet her in your house.'

'I accept your explanation, Captain Cameron,' replied Cora. 'What a knack you have for getting out of difficulties, and smoothing rough places.'

When Ketha had swallowed her tea, which almost seemed to choke her. Lady Garnet said:

'I shall be obliged if you will finish sewing the embroidery on that dress of mine Miss Scott. I shall require it to-morrow morning to wear.'

Ketha took the hint, and, gathering up the silk folds over her arm with a heightened colour, she scarcely glanced at the visitor as she passed him on her way to the door, with just a very slight inclination of the head.

She felt mortified and angry, for Lady Garnet had addressed her in the tone and language that would have been more suitable had she been giving directions to her lady's-maid. Malcolm was quite capable of leaving such an impression on her visitor's mind if she felt so disposed.

Ketha was beginning to understand what sort of a woman this was who had hired her—apparently as a butt for all her ill-temper, a vent for all annoyance caused by others; but even yet she did not know her, or she would certainly have acted differently.

'I wonder what she is to him? I wonder why he comes here? She spoke to him as an old friend. She evidently likes him and oh! if she loves him, she will win him she is so lovely, so fascinating. Well, have I not given him up? Oh, Malcolm, why did I set you free? I think you loved me truly and did not desire your liberty then. No, no, no, Ketha Scott, you could not have acted differently. Rest satisfied.'

Such were her thoughts as she sat up in her bedroom, stitching away wearily at her ladyship's dress.

She heard the visitor take his departure not long after, the handle of her door turned and Cora entered.

Ketha rose expecting a storm, but instead Lady Garnet drew her gently on to the sofa, and looking into her face with a charming, naive embarrassment in her own eyes, she began half hesitatingly:

'Oh my dear, what must you think of me? I behaved like a perfect brute. I am so frightfully impulsive, and I felt, do you know, somehow as if you had treated me unfairly when I found you had been living here so long under an assumed name. Well, I was hurt, I must own, but I dare say you had a very good reason for what you did. So, forgive me, won't you? and Cora held out both hands, and then as if impelled by an irresistible impulse leaned forward and kissed Ketha on her forehead.

The poor girl's generous heart responded at once. She thought she had been unjust, and longed to make amends.

'Oh, Lady Garnet, it is I who must ask for your forgiveness. I feel I have not been frank with you, but now I will tell you all. I am sure you will understand my motive for assuming another name. I will confide in you.'

'Nay, I do not ask that, dear child,' said Cora, with a well-acted depreciating gesture. 'Keep your secret if you wish. I trust you.'

'No, no, I will tell you all, Lady Garnet, because I feel you are my friend.'

Cora merely pressed the hand which she still held and smiled right into her companion's eyes.

This was just what she had wished might happen.

'If I know exactly how the land lies I can make my plans accordingly, was her thought, as she prepared to listen with a downcast face to poor Ketha's love story. And the unsuspecting girl never saw that in the game of life she was playing her best card into her soft caressing fingers lightly rested on her companion's arm, as a cat would stroke the mouse she shortly intended to devour.

The tears stood in Cora's large dark eyes as Ketha came to the close of her tender tale, and Ketha, looking, saw the wet eyelashes, and guessed not (how should she, being so sincere?) that mortification was rather the source of those bright drops than sympathy.

'Poor darling, how you must have suf-

fered! It was indeed noble of you to give him up; but yet I do not see how under the circumstances any true woman could have acted otherwise. When one loves, one can be unselfish. I know his father, Lord Lochaber, would be heart broken if he married a penniless girl, and Malcolm himself has often confessed to me how utterly necessary it is for him to wed with wealth.'

Suddenly Ketha drew away her hand. Somehow it hurt her to hear this woman call him by his Christian name.

'Ah, and Cora best knew he was not 'Malcolm' to her.

'Well, child, as I said, you have acted most nobly,' continued her ladyship. 'Be strong in the determination you have made. If I were you, dear, do you know, I think I should see as little of him as possible. He will not come here oftener than I can help. But if I may advise you Ketha, I should say it would be kinder and better for you both that your meetings should be rare. Naturally you must yet feel considerable constraint in each others presence. Of course it is nothing to me. Captain Cameron is only a dear friend of my husband's and I am as interested in his welfare as I am in yours. So forgive me for giving you advice, won't you?'

Ketha's eyes were full of tears. Her only answer was to press Cora's fingers and thank God in her heart for sending her such a sympathizing friend.

'I think I managed that business pretty well, considering I never was reckoned clever,' thought her ladyship as she closed the door of her own room for the night. Then throwing herself into a chair, she covered her face with her hands, and through her parted lips came one word, 'Malcolm,' while her eyes grew dark with unutterable tenderness and longing.

Three months passed. The shooting season came round, and London streets were no longer the promenade of fashion. Men were all shouldering their guns, and slaughtering the wild birds during the day and dancing half through the night.

Lady Garnet paid a round of visits in the South of England, while her companion remained in Harley street.

At the end of October she returned home with a sort of plan in her mind of wintering at Pau or Cannes or Nice.

'But what shall I do with Miss Mackenzie? I do not want to take her abroad with me, and I dare not leave her at home, for Malcolm is in town, and they are sure to meet and make it up again. I can see he loves someone, and I suppose, knowing what I do, that that someone is Ketha. However, no obstacles count me. I like him better than any man I ever met—almost as well as myself, in fact—and I do not intend any other woman to be his wife. Oh, I wish I could have her removed from my path.'

She had said this half aloud as she stood in the drawing room, warming her feet and looking into the mirror at the same time.

Ketha had gone to see her friend Mrs. Roberts in Talbot street.

A footstep behind her and a face reflected in the glass caused Lady Garnet to start and turn quickly round.

It was Plush, and she felt he had overheard what she had wished so devoutly. She colored angrily, and tapped the brass tassel with her foot as she said:

'Why will you come creeping about so noiselessly, Plush? I am always finding you just by my shoulder, for all the world as if you had suddenly dropped from the skies. How do you manage to get through doors without the slightest sound? It makes me positively creep to think of it.'

Fortunately no one else overheard the conversation that followed, although it was rather vague and no names were mentioned, but it brought the butler several steps nearer to the baronet's widow—in the social scale. At the close of it Cora suddenly laid her jewelled hand on his arm.

'Pray don't don't do anything rash, Plush. Only remove her somewhere—anywhere. She annoys me. What will you do?'

He leaned forward, and lowering his voice, whispered:

'Leaving that to me, my lady. She shall be removed.'

Their eyes met in a long glance, and Cora, feeling somehow a fear of asking or knowing more, shuddered as her own fell before his hard, bold gaze.

## CHAPTER IV.

Her ladyship wintered in one of those luxurious southern cities where life is delicious and enervating as the scent of certain exotics. She felt very much in her element, being the prettiest, best-dressed woman in the place, and the centre of male interest, as a wealthy widow and a young mother. When she had worn out all her costly costumes, and seen the back of fashion, she returned to London, looking handsomer than ever—at least, Plush thought so as he opened the front door of her Harley street house, and in his respect full low-toned way hoped that her ladyship had passed a pleasant winter abroad.

'Where is Miss Mackenzie, Plush?' she asked, suddenly turning round. 'I have not heard from her for six weeks.'

'No, my lady? She has gone away, left about a month ago,' he replied quietly, looking steadily into her face which gradually grew very pale.

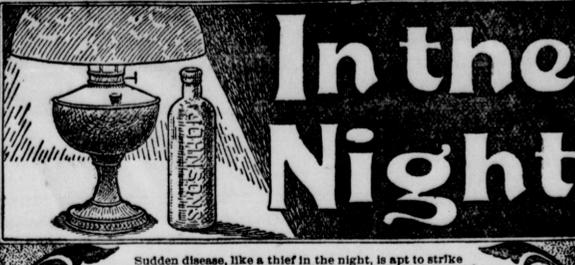
He showed her into the drawing-room, and closing the door behind him, came close to her, and said in his usual mechanical tone:

'If your ladyship will come down into the pantry at twelve o'clock, when all the house is still, I will explain this mystery.'

No change passed over his colorless evil face, and his large black eyes glittered with the steady cold gleam of shining steel.

'Oh, Plush, what have you done?' was Cora's horror-struck cry as she sank down and buried her head in the sofa cushions.

'A very good move,' he muttered as he softly closed the drawing room door and



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went downstairs. 'Didn't know I had such a talent for tragedy.'

As the clock in the hall struck twelve, a woman in white glided noiselessly as a spirit down the dark staircase, pausing to listen at each landing.

The lights were all extinguished, except in one room on the ground floor. The house was silent as death, save for the ghostly ticking of the timepiece and the howling of the night wind, which made the shutters shudder, the windows rattle.

Cora was crossing the hall when a tall figure emerged from the pantry and came towards her, holding a lamp and treading softly.

'Follow me,' said a voice which Cora knew only too well by this time, and the dark form held open a narrow door at the end of the hall, and seeing her hesitate he entered himself, and descended the stone steps into the cellar.

Cora followed, feeling as if she were walking into her grave.

No word had as yet been spoken. Her companion now turned, and raising the lamp to a level with her face, which was haggard with fear and horror, he pointed to a distant corner, where cobwebs had gathered, and the damp had penetrated the wall. A smell of lime pervaded the place.

Plush took her hand and drew her more dead than alive nearer to the spot which his finger had indicated.

Cora gazed as it impelled by some horrible fascination. What did she see? Only a wooden partition where coal had once been kept, and a heap of dust and rubbish and empty bottles.

'You see I have kept my promise. She, your rival, has been removed.'

Almost before he had finished speaking, Cora fell heavily forwards, and he caught her in his arms.

She had swooned. He smiled.

'That is well. I feared she would shriek, or go off into hysterics. Oh, my bonny Cora, how beautiful you look!'

Slowly she opened her eyes, and with a great effort staggered from the fearful spot.

The London season once more set in, and that half of the world which follows fashion, as the huntsmen follow the bounds, returned to town.

Lady Garnet gradually left off some of her mourning, and was welcomed back into society, which always holds out a hand to the wealthy and young.

But Cora was beginning to look old, and she knew it. There were purple shadows round her eyes, which always seemed haggard and terrified; her cheeks had grown thin and hollow, and she talked incessantly in a rapid, excited way, as if the sound of her own voice dispelled some trouble of her mind which came back whenever she was silent.

When at home, she was nervous to a ridiculous degree; the least noise caused her to start and turn pale, and night after night, when her guests had gone, she would almost fly up the stairs to her own room, never pausing till, with wild eyes and a beating heart, she stood behind her door, that was bolted and barred.

'My lady is losing her looks,' thought Plush one morning, as the bright sunlight shone through the window on to her white face and heavy eyes. 'We must stop there but first of all—'

And he smiled as he wondered at his own acuteness and luck.

One afternoon, 'just between the dark and the daylight,' Lady Garnet rang for the tea and lamps. She had a horror of shadows now.

Instead of bringing a light and the tray, Plush himself appeared, and closed the drawing room door.

'I rang for tea,' said Cora, somewhat what surprised at his strange conduct.

'Yes, my lady but I wanted just a few words with you first of all.'

'Well?'

'Well, my lady, it's now over three years since Sir Alison's death, and between then and now I've been a faithful servant to you I've done so on my conscience, for your ladyship's sake, which—'

'Yes, I know, I know, Plush, you need not eulogize them,' interrupted Cora, rather impatiently. 'Do you want money? How much? You really have been exorbitant in your demands lately. Where do you mean to stop? Why, I have given you already nearly five hundred pounds since Christmas.'

'My lady, you wrong me. It is not a

matter of money today which has made me seek an interview with you. It's a delicate subject to touch upon. You must have noticed that my devotion to your service, my lady, has been of a more—well, a more personal nature than—'

'What do you mean, Plush?' asked Cora, getting vaguely alarmed. 'What do you want me to do now?'

'Shall I tell you plainly?'

'Yes, and have done with it.'

The butler approached her ladyship's chair, and standing before her on the heart-bug, he leaned down, and looking straight into her bewildered eyes, said:

'I want you to marry me.'

The barrier between them of difference of rank and position was in a moment suddenly thrown down. The hour had come when Plush thought fit to cast aside ceremony and unmask himself to his accomplice.

She started to her feet any placed her hand on the back of her chair.

'But you must be mad, Plush? I marry you. Do you forget to whom you are speaking? You are surely insane to think of such a thing. Come, bring me my tea and the lamp, and I will try and forget this affair. You really presume on your position.'

'Yet you will marry me, Cora?'

'I marry you? Never, never. I would rather die. And how dare you call me "Cora," you, my servant? Leave this room at once, before I send you to seek another situation.'

You can hardly afford to do that,' replied Plush, very coolly leaning his elbow on the mantel piece, and watching his massive gold watch chain through his fingers; it wouldn't pay you, my lady, and you know best why. No, no, we're in the same boat—with a dead body on board—and we must pull together.'

'And if I dismiss you?' asked Cora.

'Of course you will do nothing of the sort. Why beat about the bush. We've had enough fooling. You know you are in my power, and you must do as I tell you. You must marry me. Do you hear?'

'Never, never. Oh Plush, ask me anything else! I will give you half my fortune, but I cannot be your wife.'

'But you must. One of these days you'd be marrying someone else, and that wouldn't suit me. Besides which I shouldn't be sure of my money.'

'But if I sign a paper promising to remain a widow, will that satisfy you?' said Lady Garnet with a sudden brightness of hope in her face.

'No, no. You must marry me. That's the long and short of it. If you refuse I shall—' and Plush leaned forward with an evil smile in his cruel black eyes.

Cora was on her knees in a moment at his feet.

'Oh, no, no! You must not betray me. But I never murdered her? she added as if a new light broke in on her brain.

'But I shall say you investigated and paid me to remove her. I was but your hired tool. Now will you marry me?'

'Will nothing else satisfy you. Oh, be merciful. I own I am in your power, but I will give you in your own hands, not five hundred, but five thousand pounds to-morrow, if you will not force me into marriage. What could it lead to but misery for both? Oh, spare me.'

He looked down at her lovely upturned face with its dusky black fringed eyes, her full-lipped childish mouth, and the heavy masses of red gold hair.

She raised her little white hands clasped, and pleaded long and earnestly that he would be content with anything but marriage, but in vain.

She saw at last how useless it was for her to humble herself any more, and with a sob of despair she gave herself up to her fate, and sank down with her face to the floor. Plush stooped on one knee and whispered:

'Come, don't cry like that. Cheer up. You will soon get use to me. When's it to be, eh?'

'Plush,' said Cora, at last lifting her tear-stained haggard face.

'Yes, my love.'

'I marry you on one condition only.'

'And that is?'

'That the marriage is kept absolutely secret from the world, now and always.'

CONTINUED ON PAGE FIFTEEN.

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