

The Maid Of The Mill.

IN TWO INSTALMENT—PART II.

When the next day came, and still there was no sign from her, he waylaid old Barbara, the Maine's servant, only to learn from her that 'Miss Mayla' was ill, or at least was keeping to her own room with a headache.

That explanation was enough to fill him with fears.

He knew Mayla was too young and healthy to let any ordinary indisposition keep her a prisoner, and hurrying back to the Manor, he made the gardener gather a basket of the rarest flowers the conservatory contained, while he wrote a tender little note, in which he told her of his love, and begged her to set his anxiety at rest.

The letter and the flowers were dispatched by one of the servants, though, if Leonard could have seen their fate, he would have known that both never reached Mayla, for Simon Maine had been ever on the watch since he had won her promise to be his wife, and they thus fell into his hands.

But Leonard did not dream of such treachery.

It did not cross his mind that, if he chose to woo and win Mayla, anyone at the mill could possibly object, and he waited as patiently as he could for the return of his messenger, never doubting that the man would bring a loving little note.

The delay was a long one.

It had been early evening before the message was dispatched, and Leonard had to join Sir Miles at dinner with his anxieties still unsatisfied.

He had not yet mentioned his love to the baronet; not that he feared opposition, but he felt that for a little time the sweet secret must be kept sacredly between Mayla and himself.

After dinner, however, Leonard's impatience could endure no more.

He rose and went out to the terrace to smoke his cigar alone as he often did, though this particular night happened to be very unprepossessing.

It had rained during the day, and now a chill white mist had come creeping up from the mill stream, blotting out all the beauty of scene.

A footstep sounded close at hand, and then he saw the servant he had sent to the mill.

'Where is the answer, Johnson?' he demanded quickly, and he received an envelope from the man's hand.

With a muttered exclamation of thankfulness, he strode to one of the windows near, from which came a broad stream of light, and there, with fast-beating heart, prepared to read his answer.

There was no address upon the envelope, and somehow the sight of the blank paper struck him with a little chill, though in the next moment he smiled at his own fears.

No doubt his little sweetheart had been too excited to remember anything so prosaic as the formality of addressing the envelope.

He tore it open, a smile upon his lips, the happy love light glowing in his eyes; and then, spell-bound, as it were, he stood staring at what he had extracted from the envelope, for it was his own letter torn in two—there was absolutely nothing else, not even a name or a line of writing to say from whom the insult had come.

In an instant more his amazement had passed away, giving place to a hot passion of anger.

He knew that it was not Mayla who had done this.

His love and trust in her were even greater than they had been before, and he burned to be avenged upon this coward who had dared to come between them.

He tore the letter into a dozen fragments and then turned away to stride through the mist from the old house upon the hill, into the valley, where the darkness was even greater than it was upon the heights.

He would not go down the dear old lane; instead, he went boldly to the front gate of the mill, where the hoarse ruck of the stream seemed louder than ever in the gloom.

All was very dark there, for the mist hid the garden, and even blotted out the lights of the house.

He had to walk slowly, not knowing his way, and able to see only a few feet before him.

His firm steps made no sound upon the sodden ground.

The silence was weary, when suddenly he stopped, for, through the hush there had come the sound of a sob mingling with the rushing of the stream.

In a moment more he dimly saw the figure of a grey-robed woman standing on the bank, her eyes fixed upon the rushing water, her head bent away so that he could not see her face.

'Oo, heaven! be merciful and forgive me. Can it be a sin to die, when, when, if I live, I must sin too?' Despairingly the words broke from her lips, and charged though it was, he knew that the voice was Mayla's.

The poor girl was maddened by her despair. All through the long hours which had passed since she had promised to be Simon Maine's wife she had remained a prisoner in her own room, brooding over what seemed her dead mother's command.

She dared not break her promise; to do so would have seemed to her the darkest sin; and yet, surely it would be a still

greater crime if she were to marry Simon Maine when all her heart was Leonard's.

Storm tossed and despairing, she knew not what to think, and so at last had even dreamed of death as her one hope; desperate as she was, it would surely be no wrong to throw her life away.

Sobbingly, passionately, her low voice thrilled through the gloom.

She looked shudderingly at the dark water which flowed at her feet, and then she closed her eyes.

One word, 'Leonard!' was on her lips; in an instant more the fatal plunge would have been made, when he sprang forward, responsive to her call, and his arms were flung around her.

'Mayla, Mayla, my dear love, I am here. What is this awful thing which has come between us?' 'Leonard—you!' 'That was all she said.'

In the joy of his presence, in the shock of knowing that he had dragged her back to life from the very jaws of death, her senses almost left her.

She lay passive in his clasp, stunned and bewildered by the joy of knowing that his arms held her, that each throb of his loving heart thrilled through her own.

His lips were pressed to hers.

His kiss filled her life.

She could not remember the past.

The hold which Simon Maine had on her was forgotten.

The joy of loving and of being loved filled all her being, and never before had life been half so sweet as in that moment when Leonard's arms had snatched her back from death.

'My little love, my Mayla,' he whispered presently, and the tender words were the first coherent sounds she heard. 'I know you love me, it has needed no words to confess that; you are all my own, and now no power on earth shall ever take you from me.'

It was then that the awakening came.

She remembered all, and he knew that she dropped in the clasp of his strong arms, and shivered through every limb as though before a mortal blow.

It was only for an instant; then slowly she raised her head, and even while her tender arms still clasped his neck, while still his heart beat with hers, she looked into his face with despairing eyes, and nervously herself to speak their last farewell.

'Yes, I love you,' she said, not shyly, but with a chill of despair in her sweet, low tones. She might have been speaking to a dead lover who lay in his coffin awaiting burial, rather than to a living man whose heart beat loyal and strong and true with love for her. 'But we must part; after to-night we must never—never meet again.'

'Why not, in Heaven's name?' he demanded almost harshly, his every nerve strained between his love and fear.

'Mayla, we love each other, and you must be my wife. I am determined that no power on earth shall ever come between us.'

'You do not know what you are saying,' she answered fatheringly, and then suddenly she broke off, with a low, half-strangled cry, which told of an agony too great to bear. 'Ah! If only I were free!' she cried. 'If only I were free!'

'Free! He hardly recognized his own voice as, with a great start, he echoed the fatal word. 'Great Heaven! What do you mean? It cannot be that you care for any other man?'

'No, no; it is not that,' she answered, and she almost smiled, though her smile was a thousand times more sad than tears.

'I love you—I love you—I love you! Yet we must part, for, if I live, I must be Simon Maine's wife!'

'His! You would throw yourself away upon a man like that?' Leonard exclaimed, in sudden anger. 'Mayla, it must not be! My dearest, I will save you from so great a wrong!'

She made a quick, hurried gesture, pressing her hand against her breast, and she felt the papers which were hidden beneath her dress.

They were those last letters from her dying mother, and it seemed to her that she heard a voice from the grave calling upon her to pay the debt which had been owed by her dear dead.

The thought gave her strength, and she shook still further from him, though still his strong arms entangled her.

'Dearest, it cannot be!' he answered. 'I am bound in honour to be his wife. I dare not break my promise to marry him.'

'He has some hold over you?' Leonard exclaimed hotly. 'Tell me what it is, and I will set you free. Is it any question of gratitude or of money? Let me know all, and, for our love's sake, I will make him release you!'

'I dare not hope for so great a happiness,' she answered faintly. 'My mother owed a debt of gratitude to him, and when she lay dying, she wrote a letter to me, her child, asking me to repay the debt. The time has come now, for Simon has told me that when once I am his wife, all will be paid a thousandfold!'

'Does he love you so much?' Leonard asked, almost with bated breath.

He realized that, in such a case as this, even his own love might be helpless.

'I don't think he loves me,' Mayla said naively, 'but he is determined that I shall be his wife, and so I must obey my

mother's wishes. Oh! I dare not hope; I know that he will never set me free.'

'Are you unkind to any money—any fortune?' Leonard demanded, seeing at once a possible key to the mystery; but she shook her head, and again there was that sad, sad smile upon her lips.

'No, oh, no, she said. 'My parents left me destitute. I owe everything to the charity of the Maine'. Ah! believe me, I must consent to this marriage; in honour there can be no way to escape for me.'

'Yet you hate the prospect so much that, only a little while ago, you thought of death as a way of escape?' Leonard said bitterly.

Man-like, he could not see all in the light in which she saw it, and, dearly though he loved her, he was half inclined to resent her determination to be true to the promise which had been extorted from her.

She shuddered at his words, but now a new strength, born of suffering, had come to the sweet young face.

She was very pale still, and her lips quivered; yet, steadfast and true, her blue eyes looked into his.

'I was mad in my despair,' she said. 'But, dear, now that I have seen you again, I have gained strength, and I know how great that sin would have been. Ah! Heaven was very merciful to send you here, so that you might save me from myself, and, in the future, it will give me strength to bear my burden and to pay my mother's debt. Good-bye—good-bye. We must never meet again. I shall know that I am doing my duty, and shall pray that you may forget.'

She was but a weak girl—almost a child; yet, in that moment, a new, sweet glamour came to her beauty, so that it seemed hardly of this earth.

The thought of what was right had nerve her to a great determination.

Leonard looked at her with hungry, passion-filled eyes, realizing, as he had never done before, how dearly he loved her, and almost a sob broke from his lips, strong man though he was, as, with a passionate gesture, he strained her yet more closely to him.

'Mayla! Mayla! you are my all,' he cried hoarsely. 'My dearest, I would rather part with life than lose you. You shall yet be my wife.'

'You are mad, Captain Frankford! Mayla is to marry me. She has given me her word, and I will never set her free.'

It was another voice—that of Simon Maine—which had broken upon them with strange abruptness.

As they heard, Leonard turned with a start; while Mayla, springing from his hold, sank upon the damp turf, with her face hidden in her hands.

From the heart of the shadows near, Maine strode with a determined tread, a burly form, with his gun upon his shoulder, though, as he paused, he rested the butt upon the ground, and stood leaning upon the weapon as he looked at the other two with an air of conscious triumph.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DEED OF A DASTARD.

'Mayla has told me of her engagement, Mr. Maine, but you must have heard enough to know that she loves me, and me alone. Surely, under these circumstances you will not insist on her becoming your wife?'

Leonard broke the momentary silence, which had fallen upon the little group, and he forced himself to speak quietly and clearly, though his every pulse was throbbing with a wild excitement which he had never known before.

He felt that his whole life depended on the answer which would be given him then.

'I do insist, nevertheless,' Maine retorted coldly. 'You choose to adopt the high hand, Captain Frankford, and to interfere, but perhaps you will be less ready to marry Mayla yourself when you know that she is nameless!'

'Nameless! In spite of himself, Leonard started as he uttered the word, and his tone was eloquent.

'Yes; nameless,' the other went on mockingly. 'Now you see how great a disadvantage this would be for you, a rich gentleman and heir to a great estate. She is not only a poor village girl, but she has an inheritance of shame as well. Her mother fled with her betrayer, only to be deserted and left to starve, while of her father's fate I know nothing. He may be still alive, for aught I can say to the contrary—the last we heard of him was when he was an inmate of a convict prison.'

He hissed the words between his clenched teeth, confident of his triumph now expecting to see Leonard turn away, glad to have escaped such a marriage.

A low moan of infinite suffering broke from Mayla.

Of all she had endured, nothing was so terrible as to hear this shameful story of the past thus revealed to the man she loved.

But as her moan died away, Leonard's voice rang out again, not faltering now, but staunch and true, with love's own music in its every tone.

'What you have told me has not altered my determination,' he said. 'I love Mayla for herself alone, and still my dearest wish is to make her my wife.'

A muttered oath broke from Maine's lips, and he drew a step back into the gloom.

Leonard followed him.

They moved away from the crouching figure of the girl.

'You are a very determined lover, Captain Frankford,' Maine said hesitatingly, as they confronted each other. 'But it is all in vain. Again I tell you that she is mine. I will never give her up.'

A sudden hope came to Leonard.

He remembered what Mayla had implied—that another motive than love was surely influencing this man's wooing.

'I followed you from her presence so that we might speak plainly to each other,'

he said. 'We are here as man to man, and I need have no false delicacy. Tell me, are there no terms on which you will set her free? I am a rich man, and I—'

'I have a price, if that is what you mean,' the other answered sneeringly. 'For two hundred thousand pounds I might set Mayla free, but not for a penny less.'

'You are mad! I could not pay so much, but if half my fortune—'

'I have told you what I want, though I know you cannot pay it. Now you had better go; surely you can understand that your love is hopeless. Mayla is mine, and I shall never give her up.'

'Then I will wrest her from you,' Leonard cried, losing all patience. 'She loves me, and you shall never win her, even if you stand at the altar by her side. There is some mystery here—some mystery in her life—whatever it may be I will solve it, confident that when I know all, I shall have learnt how to make you give her up.'

It was a random shot, but it struck home, for a furious oath broke from the bearded lips of the other.

In a moment he seemed to lose all control of himself.

'You shall not trace the secret,' he cried, incoherently. 'You shall not take her from me. Before you do that I will kill you where you stand.'

He had sprung back, moving with lightning speed, so that Leonard had no time to be on his guard, no time to think what it was he was about to do.

Simon Maine lifted to his shoulder the gun he carried—in the gloom he contrived to take deliberate aim—and then through the night there leaped a vivid flash, followed by a sharp report.

Leonard staggered back, but he was unharmed, for in the very instant that the trigger had been pulled a slender form had sprung forward, and Mayla stood between the two men, with her hands held out entreatingly to the would-be murderer.

'Spare him—spare him—I will keep my word!' she cried, but the report of the rifle drowned her pleading voice, and the next instant she had thrown up her arms, and with a moan of pain fell heavily backwards, to his senseless at the feet of the man she loved.

'Dastard! You have killed her!' Leonard exclaimed, and he sprang forward to close with the other man and drag the gun from his grasp.

He seemed stunned by what had passed; he could only stare for a moment in a fascination of horror at the still form of the poor girl, and then, as Leonard would have held him prisoner, he roused himself from his trance, and, with one last look at the white face, where the shadows of death seemed gathering, he fled from the scene to vanish into the night gloom.

Leonard had no thought of pursuit; his thoughts were all of Mayla.

He went to her side again, calling her name, kissing her cold lips; but he could bring back no sign of life.

The mill was close at hand, and the village was not far away, but he felt, in that moment of despair, that he dared not trust her to be left in either, whether she were living or dead.

Instead, he lifted her in his arms, carrying her as though she had been but a little child, and bore her away through the darkness, up to the great house upon the hill which was his own home.

He never forgot that weary walk with his motionless burden, but the Manor was reached at last.

He entered it by one of the long French windows, and, laying Mayla upon a couch, rang the bell so violently that the alarm pealed through the house again and again.

One of the first to enter the room was Sir Miles, who paused in amazement, looking alternately at Leonard's pale, trembling face, and at the still form of the girl on the couch.

'Leonard, what does this mean?' he asked. 'Who—who is this?'

'The girl I love, Sir Miles,' Leonard answered. 'Heaven forgive me! I have brought her here to die, for she has given her life for mine.'

An exclamation of infinite pity broke from the elder man, and he crossed the room to the couch.

As the poor girl had fallen, she had thrust her hands into the coiled masses of her hair, and the tangles had given way, so that now the loosened tresses streamed in a silken veil to screen her pallid face.

Very gently the baronet bent down to put them aside, and for one moment he stood motionless, staring down upon the sweet face which was thus revealed, then staggered back, a great cry upon his lips.

'It is the ghost of my dead love!' he cried brokenly. 'My wife has come back from the grave!'

Mayla, after a while, came out of her swoon, thanks to the loving care which was lavished upon her, though her first consciousness was one of intense, burning pain in her shoulder.

A doctor was by her side, with a couple of women servants, and as her eyes opened she smiled down upon her reassuringly.

'Come, that is better,' he said. 'Your wound hurts now, but it is not going to be very serious. The bullet is extracted, and you will soon be quite yourself again. Drink this now and go to sleep, and when you wake up you will be well on the high road to recovery.'

Mayla obediently drained the glass he held to her lips, and it evidently contained a narcotic, for almost immediately she fell into a long heavy sleep, from which she did not wake until the next day was well advanced.

Then, when her eyes opened her memory came back with a rush, and she turned her face to the wall, forgetting the pain of her wound in the mental agony which she endured.

For she realized that she was at the Manor; she knew that she had saved Leonard's life, and guessed that he loved her still, while in honor she was yet bound to

be the wife of his would-be murderer.

From the very grave her dead mother called to her, as it were, and she dared not disobey; yet she knew that, as she once looked on Leonard's dear face again if once she listened to his voice, all would be forgotten save her love for him.

The thought of her divided duty galvanized her into fresh strength, and from it a new resolution came.

Dearly as she loved Leonard, she would stay no longer here, she would go back to the mill, to pray that she might die; but if she lived she would become Simon Maine's wife, though she dreaded the marriage worse, a thousand times, than death.

'I have given him my promise,' she thought miserably. 'For my mother's sake it is doubly sacred, I must keep it to the bitter end.'

She swallowed the food they brought her and then lay still, so that servants thought she was asleep again; but as soon as they had gone on tip-toe from the room she sprang from the bed, to dress herself as quickly as her wounded arm would allow.

She endured exquisite pain in every movement, but her resolution gave her strength to bear all without a murmur; and when at last her toilet was complete, she opened the door of the room noiselessly, and glided into the corridor without.

Then suddenly she paused, for she realized the love she was leaving behind, and the hopelessness of the future which lay before her.

She almost broke down, but it seemed that the voice of her dead mother called to her; and sobbing, trembling, broken-hearted, she yet found strength to glide swiftly through the great house, flying with redoubled speed because she heard Leonard's voice in one of the rooms near, and all her heart and soul seemed to strive to drag her back to him.

Yet she would not yield.

She escaped from the Manor, and fled across the wide lawn to the tree-shade park.

There, when a sheltering thicket was reached, all her strength gave way.

She flung herself face downwards on the mossy turf, stunned and overwhelmed with the misery she endured, so that even the agony of her wound was forgotten.

A long time elapsed; then she found strength to rise from the ground and to go on again towards the mill, taking the least-frequented lanes, so that she came at last to the dear old stile where first she and Leonard met.

She dare not linger there, she dare not think of the past, for she had parted from him for ever.

Until evening, with the strength of despair she went up the grassy path through the orchard, until she reached the porch.

She opened the door and went into the cottage, and as she crossed the threshold old Barbara emerged from the kitchen at the further end of the little passage.

'You have come back, then,' the old woman said harshly. 'Do you want to see the master?'

'Is he at home?' Mayla asked faintly, as she leaned against the wall for support.

Now that the interview with Simon was close at hand, she realized more bitterly than before how terrible it would be.

The old woman came to where she stood, her dark face working strangely.

Hitherto she had always been kind to Mayla, for she was devoted to Simon, whom she had nursed when he was a little child, and she had thought his future wife was to be loved for his sake.

But now there was a light in her eyes which Mayla had never seen there before, and she cowered in terror from it.

'Yes; he is at home,' the old woman said. 'He is waiting for you, because he loved you so well that he swore you should never marry any other man. You have come back to him now, have you not? You will never, never go away from him again?'

'I will be his wife if he insists upon the marriage,' Mayla faltered, with white lips. 'He need not be afraid that I shall break my word.'

'Then go to him—he is waiting for you there!' Barbara exclaimed, with a strange chuckle that was half-sad and half-laughter, and, with a quick movement, she flung open the door of the best parlor so that Mayla might enter.

Trembling the girl crossed the threshold, the woman following close behind, and then she paused.

'Where is Simon?' she asked, and it seemed to her that her voice sounded still and strange in that hushed room. 'He is not here.'

'He is sleeping,' the old woman answered, and she pointed to the sofa. 'Go and wake him, if you can.'

Mayla's eyes followed the direction of that outstretched hand, and then she saw the indistinct outlines of a human form lying under a rug upon the sofa.

Her first impulse was to draw back, to go on tip-toe from the room for fear of awakening the sleeper; but some power, which was not her own will, drew her to him.

She crossed the room and drew down the covering, and then, with a wail of anguish, started back, her wild eyes riveted in terror upon the ghastly face of that recumbent form; for Simon Maine was dead, his face convulsed by the last agony of death.

'What does this mean?' Mayla asked faintly. 'How—how did he die?'

'It was all through you,' old Barbara answered, and she came quickly to the girl's side. 'I, too, was in the garden last night, for I missed you from your room and followed you; while afterwards, when you had met Captain Frankford, it was I who went to warn Simon of your falseness. I who brought him to you. I saw the shot fired, and when you fell my boy thought he had killed you. He went mad in his despair then, and tried to fly, but fell into the mill stream, to drown in sight of home. It is your work—all yours—you have robbed me of him whom I loved as if he had been my own son; but I have been left behind to make sure that you shall keep your

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