

A Terrible Bond

IN TWO INSTALLMENTS—PART II.

'Well?' repeated the lady, knowing from her husband's gloomy countenance that she had nothing pleasant to expect.

'It is as I anticipated,' replied her husband. 'He has proved himself an out and out scoundrel—a blackguard of the deepest dye.'

This was strange language for the usually mild spoken vicar to make use of, and by reason of it, Mrs. Collingham felt convinced that the worst had happened.

'Arthur is not dead, then?' she said faintly.

'Dead? No! The villain is going to be married and that shortly.'

Mrs. Collingham sat down, crying quietly.

'Alice! Oh! my darling child! How shall I tell her? Her whole heart was set on Arthur Vivian.'

The mother could think of nothing but her daughter's grief; but the father was made of sterner stuff.

A great and righteous anger made him speak harshly.

'Then she must treat him with the scorn he deserves!' he said impatiently. 'Surely a child of mine will have more pride than to fret over a blackguard like my Lord Sayce.'

'Lord Sayce?'

'Yes; he has come into his uncle's title, fortune, and estates. Alice, of course, isn't good enough for him now.'

This was said with the utmost bitterness.

'Alice is good enough for any man!' fired up the mother.

'Apparently Lord Sayce does not think so,' with a shrug of the shoulders.

'He is an utterly unprincipled scoundrel, and I for one, considered that Alice has had a lucky escape. It's bad enough for him to show up in his true colors before marriage, but what would it have been afterwards? No; depend upon it Mary, it is best as it is.'

Mrs. Collingham wiped her eyes. She began to see a ray of hope.

Surely it would be for the best were her daughter to turn to the man who had loved her from her childhood—in short, if Bert Thornton were to catch her heart on the rebound.

Such things were not uncommon.

'Who is he?—as yet she could not bring herself to utter Vivian's name—'going to marry?'

'Lady Fancourt.'

'That woman after all?'

'Yes. You see my dear we believed him. We had the wrong end of the story. Instead of her ladyship running after him, he was undoubtedly running after her.'

'Why, she was a divorced woman! and Arthur—this time the name came out unconsciously—'always had such a horror of divorce. Even now I can't understand it—I can't indeed.'

'It is all too true, nevertheless,' replied the vicar. 'But I will own I never in all my life was more taken in by a young man than I have been by Arthur Vivian—so apparently open an honest, so outwardly devoted to Alice—in fact everything I could possibly wish or hope for in a son-in-law.'

Mrs. Collingham sighed.

She, too, had been very fond of Arthur Vivian.

His good looks and cheer, almost boyish ways had endeared him to this simple couple, who had no son of their own.

'One of his brother officers happened to be in the club whilst I was making enquiries—a very nice fellow—Captain Legard by name. I told him my reason for troubling him—'

'Oh, you shouldn't have done that. Remember, Alice—'

The vicar looked a bit sheepish.

'Legard is to be depended upon,' he said. 'My interview was in the strictest confidences. I am rarely mistaken—'

'You were about Arthur Vivian.'

Mrs. Collingham could not resist the taunt; she was very jealous of her daughter's name.

'And Captain Legard's is a face to be trusted,' resumed his reverence, as though he hadn't heard his wife's remark. 'He told me much that was strange and incomprehensible. It seems that suddenly Vivian sent in his papers, giving no reason for so doing. The news of his accession to the peerage, however, supplied a motive for him—later on. His conduct became most extraordinary. He shut himself up in his quarters, seeing no one, drinking hard—'

'Arthur never drank,' interrupted Mrs. Collingham. 'A more abstemious young fellow never lived—for an officer, too!'

Mrs. Collingham's ideas about the service were somewhat hazy. 'No, I can't believe that part of the story.'

'You needn't,' was the short reply; 'but it is true nevertheless. At the Curragh they were equally astonished. Legard admitted it was unlike Vivian. He was put on sick leave to avoid unpleasantness in the regiment, and remained confined to his quarters, where he rarely saw anyone.'

Captain Legard saw him once, and he told me that in one short fortnight, he had changed almost past recognition. His very manner was different; even the expression of his face had changed. No wonder, I say, when all the time he was contemplating a terrible wrong to an innocent girl who loved him.'

The vicar paused, gloomily retrospective.

'Legard also told me,' he went on after

a moment, 'that—but, perhaps, I ought not to mention such a matter to you.'

'Oh, yes! Tell me all—I have a right to know!' cried his better half.

'Well—reluctantly—it seems that—that, part of the time, there was a lady in his hut.'

The vicar positively blushed as he made this statement.

'That woman! Lady Fancourt?'

'Not likely. He would hardly thus compromise the woman he intended to marry. No, my dear, we have been mistaken in Arthur Vivian all through, and we must make the best of it now. By the way, they had a terrific snowstorm in Kildare. Legard told me the drifts were eight or ten feet deep in places, rendering the roads impassable. One poor fellow was found dead in a wood when at last the snow melted away. It created quite a sensation in the place.'

'I don't know why it should,' replied Mrs. Collingham absently, her mind full of the unpleasant task before her. 'People shouldn't travel on foot in a snowstorm.'

'But it wasn't the snow that killed him. The poor fellow was shot through the heart.'

'Suicide, I suppose,' still absently.

'No one knows; the thing remains a mystery.'

'Which I can't imagine you troubling yourself about when we have a real tragedy at our very doors,' was the wife's reply.

But long afterwards she remembered her husband's story, and invested it with a significance as certain as it was terrible.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE SNARE OF THE FOWLER.

The marriage of the new peer, Lord Sayce, to the beautiful divorcee, Lady Fancourt, surprised the fashionable world greatly.

It was not often that it was given to a woman, no matter how beautiful, to so completely whitewash herself in the eyes of society as in this instance.

What a thousand pities that so handsome and gifted a man as his lordship should throw himself away upon a woman whose reputation was, to say the least of it, doubtful.

All of a sudden the gossips remembered many things they had either forgotten or ignored—things relating to the state of affairs which had brought about the divorce of Lord and Lady Fancourt.

Surely her ladyship's name had been coupled with Captain Arthur Vivian's—what was the story, now?

Either was she infatuated with her or she with him.

Then again—oh! there was something in that story.

Hadn't Captain Vivian given the rumour the lie by engaging himself to some little nobody down in Warwickshire—some country parson's daughter, to whom he was supposed to be devoted?

So said the gossips, ending up with the remark—

'Well, it doesn't signify now. He's married her ladyship, no matter which way about it was. At all events, Captain Vivian—or Lord Sayce, as he is now—was never mixed up in the divorce proceedings; and as the man who was, as well as the injured husband, is dead, really it doesn't concern us. The question is, shall we call upon her? Would it be possible to ignore the lady's past?'

To answer for the most part, was in the affirmative, although there were some old-fashioned enough to declare that a marriage with one of the wealthiest peers in England was not sufficient to reinstate a woman who, by her own folly and frailty, had fallen from her high estate.

But these, as can well be imagined, were decidedly in the minority; so when, in the beginning of the season, Lord and Lady Sayce returned from their honeymoon yachting trip in the Mediterranean, and settled down in town with all the splendour appertaining to their rank and fortune, they found no lack of callers, amongst whom might be numbered some of the highest in the land.

Really she is very lady-like, and certainly exceedingly handsome,' said the Dowager Lady Hardcastle to her elderly unmarried daughter, as they drove away from the great reception at Sayce House.

'And such diamonds! By the way, Clementina, my dear, can you recall who she was before her marriage? My memory is so bad.'

'Which marriage, mamma?'

'Oh, the Fancourt one, of course!'

'I believe she was a circus rider, or a chorus girl, or worse; but really I don't know,' replied Clementina indifferently, her thoughts being elsewhere.

A certain middle-aged baronet had been introduced to her during the evening by her hostess, and in his attentions she saw possibilities.

'For one shall cultivate Lady Sayce,' remarked the dowager. 'By-the-by, she wants us to lunch with her on Saturday, to meet Sir Thomas Belton, the middle-aged baronet. We have no engagement for that day, Clementina?'

'None.'

And so the newly married couple, took their places in society, and guessed at the skeleton in the cupboard, nor that the link which bound the husband and wife together was anything but the bond of love.

How could they know that the contract

entered into was a contract of crime—of fear and hatred on one side; of deceit, oppression, and tyranny on the other?

Each held the other's secret.

Each possessed a whip of scorpions with which to lash the other; but it was an unequal battle, the stronger will triumphing over the weaker.

Enid, beautiful and admired as she was, was probably the most miserable woman on God's earth.

Married to a man whom she regarded with a feeling little short of loathing, bound to him by a tie too horrible to contemplate, day by day she lived a living death.

Of what avail to her were rank, fortune, priceless jewels?

All was to her as gall and wormwood.

An overwhelming remorse smote her soul.

In her dreams she rehearsed again and again the snowstorm tragedy.

She saw—in visions born of the darkness and of abject fear—the man she loved lying dead at her feet, slain in a moment of madness by her own hand.

She felt upon her face the whirling snow flakes, always and for ever falling—falling.

Small wonder that the lovely woman became wan and haggard—that her nerves became cruelly unstrung.

Nights of terror, from which she would arise shaken and pallid, the sweat of agony still upon her brow; days made up of endeavouring to conceal from the argus eyes of her tyrant and from the world her mental sufferings—all this did not conduce to the preservation of the beauty which had aroused Lord Sayce's passion.

One morning—a lovely May morning, sweet and fresh and wholesome—he looked in her face with a steady scrutiny, and a strange expression in her eyes, which somewhat puzzled, and certainly frightened her.

Enid Sayce was painfully conscious that the bright sunlight was showing her up to the worst possible advantage.

She was too well aware of the fact that her sleepless nights and dreadful dreams were telling on her delicate beauty.

She felt that she was pale and haggard, but she controlled her nerves sufficiently to make no sign, although she had to clench the white hands lying in her lap to still their trembling.

A cold smile swept the handsome, cynical countenance.

He turned from the contemplation of the beautiful woman with a short laugh.

He had compelled her to be his, and already he was tiring of his bargain.

'Do you know, Enid, that you are losing your good looks?' he said carelessly.

She bit her lips sharply, to prevent the answer she would fain have given.

'I am sorry if such is the case.'

'So am I; for if there is anything in the world I dislike, it is a faded, passeé woman. I did not think you would have worn so badly.'

The cool brutality of the speech lashed her like a whip.

She opened her lips, a torrent of words upon them.

He held up his hand to enjoin silence, and placed before her the portrait of a young and beautiful girl.

'What do you think of that?' he inquired coolly.

'Is she—pointing to the photograph—'to be my successor?'

He laughed lightly.

'That depends,' he said. 'She is pretty, is she not? You are a bit shaky this morning, I see. Allow me.'

He propped the picture up before her on the table.

Unwillingly her eyes dwelt upon the lovely, girlish face.

'Who is she?' she said.

'The girl who at the present moment would have been Lady Sayce but for you.'

'Good heavens! not—not—'

Lady Sayce lay back, her eyes wide with horror.

The cold smile on his lordship's face deepened.

Here, indeed, was sport after his own heart—the baiting of a defenceless woman whom he held in his power.

'I see you have guessed she pretty girl's name,' he said. 'You are right. This is the portrait of Miss Alice Collingham, the late Captain Vivian's fiancée. What am I talking about? Of course, I mean my late fiancée—the girl I threw over for you. I thought you would be interested in seeing what your rival was like.'

'Coward! I wonder you dare—'

'Dare! What a singular expression! I'm afraid, my dear, that prosperity, and getting the husband you angled so long for has not improved your temper. Now sit down—don't excite yourself.'

Enid Sayce had risen, her glorious eyes aflame with outraged dignity; only the knowledge of her own impotence kept her within bounds.

'By Jove! if you'd always look like that Enid, you needn't fear losing your beauty. You look like a tragedy queen.'

'I wonder how you dare,' she repeated, 'knowing you are—who you are!'

'Who I am? Really, my love, you become more and more incomprehensible. I am Lord Sayce.'

'You are—?'

'I wouldn't say it if I were you.' The sneer about his mouth maddened her.

'You may forget some day that we are not alone. You must endeavor to remember that you are married to the man you always loved. Even society will look over a great deal if they scent out a romance.'

'What did you marry me for?'

The question was abrupt, and the voice that put it harsh.

'What, indeed?—with a shrug of the shoulders. 'Faith, my dear, I can hardly tell you, though I believe I had an idea that you were the only woman I wanted. Old, wasn't it?'

'And now?'

'It seems you are very anxious to force my hand. Don't do it, Enid—don't do it—'tisn't wise. Time enough when I tell you I am tired of you. Between us exists no common bond.'

Lady Sayce shuddered.

She realized how true were his words.

'Yes,' he went on irrelevantly, 'she is a lovely girl, this Alice Collingham. Suppose I return to this old love of mine, what then?'

His glittering eyes swept the pale face opposite him.

'Then—then—I would speak the truth! I would dash you from the pinnacle on which you have placed yourself—her dark eyes were blazing with passion now.'

'On which you placed me, Lady Sayce, you mean, by a crime which has a very ugly name.'

'I would not care. I am weary of it all! I am ready to take the consequences of my madness. Anything to prevent an outrage such as you mediate?'

'One would think you had played the part of loving wife so long that it had become indeed, a reality that you loved me, you are not jealous, surely?'

He looked at her a little curiously.

He did not quite understand this new mood.

'Jealous? No. Love you? Why, I hate you. I never realized the meaning of the word 'hate' till now. I am but thinking of an innocent girl, who would be, in your unscrupulous hands, as a bird in the snare of the fowler!'

'You are uncomplimentary. I wonder you are not afraid to talk to me like that.'

The look he cast upon her was so fraught with terrible meaning that Enid's newfound courage died away more quickly than it had sprung up.

She was in this man's power, and she knew it.

Hate him she might and did; but stronger than hate was the thrill which bound her tighter than bands of iron, and over her flung that mysterious glamour which for lack of a better work, we style 'fascination'—that which attracts a bird to the snake—a moth to the flame.

This weird power Lord Sayce well knew how to exercise over the wretched woman who, by her own mad deed, had placed herself irrevocably in his power.

CHAPTER VI.

A TERRIBLE TEMPTATION.

'Certainly accept her invitation; the change will do you good, dear. This is but a dull place for a young girl.'

Thus said Mrs. Collingham to her daughter, one day towards the end of May.

The girl did her mother's bidding listlessly; one place was much the same as another to her in these days.

She had never got over her lover's cruel desertion.

He was false—he was the husband of another—this she knew well enough—did not all her little world know it, too, and pity her? And yet she had not sufficient pride to cast him from her thoughts.

Strange that she should still regard him in her own mind as dead—not faithless.

And so it came to pass that she journeyed to London, and took up her abode with her godmother, a sprightly old lady who had a sumptuous, if somewhat old-fashioned, residence in Russell Square.

It mayn't be quite as far West as some folk would like, but look at the rooms, my dear! And yet she had not sufficient pride to cast him from her thoughts.

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