

## FAITHLESS BUT TRUE.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS—PART I.

### CHAPTER I.

#### ORDERED FOREIGN.

The village of Most could not be called a lively place, and, if it had not been for the neighbouring town of Churchford, it would have been duller still.

Churchford boasted of a great abbey church, and its inhabitants had strong hopes of some day seeing it made a cathedral or minister, with a bishop at the head of a proper establishment of deans and canons.

Till that event happened, they contented themselves with the military, and were not ungrateful to a past government for having built barracks outside the town.

In a small way Most looked upon itself as a fashionable suburb outside the town.

There was sprinkling of villas along the road between the two, and the Hall, which stood on rising ground commanding the village, and was the seat of Sir Godfrey Lyzette, knight, the well-known art collector, critic and writer, added a lustre to the village, of which its inhabitants were duly proud.

Beyond the village—that is to say, on the further side from Churchford—stood three or four houses of an older type than the more recently built villa residences already alluded to.

One, an old red brick house, graced by a cupola, in which hung a bell turned green by time and weather, was the residence of Miss Talbot, a maiden lady of a certain age, much respected in the neighborhood, none the less that she had simple means, and paid occasional fleeting visits to London and Paris.

A little beyond her house stood Rosemary cottage, a pretty, two storied house, not nearly so small as its name would indicate, in which dwelt Mrs Carson and her two daughters.

Both houses had large old-fashioned garden running back into orchards, behind which again was a wood, which sheltered them from the cold north-east winds.

Miss Talbot, one of those people whom grey hair suits, and who seem to grow handsomer as they advance in years, was taking her cup of afternoon tea, when the door of the room opened, and her nephew, Captain Lacy, whose regiment was quartered at Churchford, came in, and after dutifully kissing her cheek, settled himself in an arm-chair near the window, which, as it was a warm day, was open.

He was good-looking, with grey eyes, and short brown moustache, and was a decided favourite with his aunt.

"My dear Philip," she exclaimed, "I am sure it's very good of you to drop in. I was just lamenting that no one had called this afternoon. You will have a cup of my tea, or would you like sherry or brandy—and soda better?"

"I will have a glass of sherry, aunt, please," he answered. "No need to ring. I know where the decanter is. I can stay only a few minutes, but I just dropped in to tell you that we are ordered off to Egypt to help Kitchener in his advance. Glorious news isn't it?"

"My dear boy, it's just what I have been in dread of for the last month, after what you told me about expecting to have to go. How can you call it glorious? I call it dreadful, and I shall be in a fidget till I have you safe back."

"Oh, it won't be a long campaign, aunt!" he answered. "You see, the Sirdar is almost within striking distance already of Khartoum, but we shall be there in time for any fighting that may take place, which is the great thing. A fellow has so few chances in these days of seeing a bit of active service."

"Well, my dear, so you are a soldier, I suppose you ought to feel as you do. All the same, I shall dread to read the war news, for I shall be always expecting to see your name amongst those of the killed or wounded."

The young officer rose and kissed his aunt again, as he crossed the room to the sideboard and took out the decanter of sherry and a wine glass.

"You are a good sort, aunt," he said, "and I was afraid the news would upset you a bit. All the same, there is nothing for you to worry about. The climate may be a bit trying, but I'm strong enough to stand a good deal of knocking about; and, as for the Arabs—poor devils!—they won't have much chance against regular troops."

He drank his sherry slowly, and listened to his aunt's innumerable questions with as much patience as he could command.

Except an uncle, who might, or might not, leave him his property, he had no near relation, save his aunt, and he thoroughly appreciated all the kindness she had shown him ever since the time when he used to come home to her for the holidays.

However, his present visit was but a short one.

"I must be getting back to my work," he said, "and shall take the way through your garden and across the road. The road is dusty; but I will be back by seven o'clock before I go—most likely to a new evening. There will be no more, and perhaps you will be glad to see me."

"My dear Philip, you should go out and see the world. You have never seen the world, and I have seen it all. Of course, you will die before you see it. It's been very pleasant seeing you so near me for the last few months, and I

shall miss you dreadfully, to say nothing of the anxiety I shall feel. Well, if you must go, my dear, you must. You will find the gate of the orchard unlocked. But I wish you could stay a little longer."

But this the young officer declared to be impossible.

There were a hundred and one things he had to do, so he took his leave, and, passing out into the old-fashioned back garden, with its beds of tulips and quaintly cut yew trees, made his way first into the orchard, and then into a narrow lane that ran beyond.

A few yards further down the lane, a stile gave admittance to the field-path that, after cutting across a corner of Sir Godfrey Lyzette's park, led to Churchford, joining the main road near the barracks.

Crossing a narrow field, Philip Lacy vaulted over a second stile in the park fence, and threw away his cigar as he caught sight of a girlish figure between the trees.

The girl was strolling slowly along the path, and he was close to her before she heard his footsteps and turned.

"Oh! Philip, I had almost given you up," she exclaimed. "What has kept you so long?"

He threw a glance round to see that they were alone, and then seized her hands, and, drawing her to him, kissed her rosy lips.

"I had to go to my aunt's first," he said, "as they walked side by side beneath the trees, whose newly opened leaves were all a shimmer with the glory of the setting sun. 'I had some news to tell her—news which you can perhaps guess, dear.'"

"Oh! Philip, you are not ordered away—to Egypt?"

And the girl looked up in his face with timid, entreating eyes, as if praying him to say it was not so.

"The route's come, dear," he answered, stooping and kissing the pale upturned face.

"But you knew we expected it. It won't be long, dear; the campaign won't last a year, and then the chances are twenty to one that we shall be ordered straight back to England."

The girl sighed wearily.

"I have been dreading this for weeks past, ever since you first mentioned about being sent away," she murmured. "Philip, I shall never be able to stand against mother and Sarah. I know I ought to be stronger-minded, but when you are away I shall have no one to give me courage."

"My dear Laura, you must find courage," he answered. "I know your mother thinks a poor captain of infantry not good enough for her pretty daughter; but mothers can't expect to have it all their own way in this world. I ought to have written and put the case before my uncle, I know, but I put it off, and now it must wait till I return. You must be true to me, Laura, and when I come back we'll get married, even if your mother won't give her consent."

The girl pouted her pretty lips.

"It's all very well, Philip," she answered petulantly. "You are going away in high spirits and I'm left behind to be worried by mother and sneered at by Sarah. They are always saying that I have only to lift my little finger and I should have Sir Godfrey at my feet."

"Hang Sir Godfrey! Why, he's old enough to be your father. You can't care sixpence about him, Laura, and you do love me."

She looked up at him and smiled.

"How vain you are! she said. "But you know it's true. I want to be loved and petted, and I can't bear being always scolded and sneered at, and Sarah is worse than mother. It's because she's so cross that Sir Godfrey won't look at her."

"But, Laura, you can't care for Sir Godfrey, and all his wealth won't tempt you to break your word to me."

"No, Philip; I will be true. I won't be a little coward. Only you don't know how hard it is to be nagged at day after day. Oh, I do wish you were not going; I shall be so lonely and miserable."

And the sweet dark eyes grew moist with tears.

"I wish I had made all straight before these confounded orders arrived," he answered. "But we must make the best of it, dear. Let me, whilst away, be quite as certain of you as you can be of me, and then we can look forward to the future and the time when we shall be happy together."

And then he did his best, by talking of that future to keep her from thinking of the present, and for a little time he succeeded.

But then came the moment of parting, and, then he promised to call and take a formal leave of the family on the morrow, it was the last time for a year, at least that they would be alone together, and the girl broke down, and clung to him with her head on his breast, sobbing.

He comforted her all he could, and kissed away the tears from her eyes; but still with the twilight gathering round them, she clung to him as if she could not let him go.

"What will you think of me, Philip?" she whispered, when at length she gained some command over herself; "but I cannot help it, dear. I never could stand trouble, and cried dreadfully when I left school and all my friends. It's terrible to be such a

child, and I am ashamed of myself—dreadfully ashamed; but you are all I have. Philip, for mother and Sarah are always cross with me. Ah! I wish we had got married, and I was going with you."

"And I wish it with all my soul," he answered. "But you know how your mother opposed even an engagement. And now love, we must say good-bye. It will not be for long, and then, in spite of mother and sister, I mean to claim you. Kiss me, dear again, and again, for they will have to last me, perhaps for a whole year. But we shall write to one another. Come! I will walk back as far as the lane with you and we will arrange all about the writing."

### CHAPTER II.

#### SIR GODFREY'S WOOING.

The first month of her lover's absence passed to Laura wearily enough.

It was not only that she missed him, but she had to listen to her elder sisters sneers about the proverbial fickleness of soldiers, and her mother would either sigh and pose as a martyr, or else declare that the very name of Philip Lacy was causeous, and that there ought to be a law passed forbidding soldiers under the rank of generals from marrying.

Laura bore it all patiently, but there was worse to come.

Even before Philip had left, Sir Godfrey Lyzette had shown some interest in Mrs. Carson's pretty daughter, and when they met, had paid her a few stilted compliments.

During the early summer he was in London, and Laura's mother never omitted to pick out from the paper any paragraph in which his name was mentioned, and to read it aloud to her daughters.

Towards the end of July, however, he returned to the Hall and a few days later, called at Rosemary Cottage.

He was a tall, angular-shaped man, with narrow shoulders, a clean-shaven face, which, a good deal resembled that of a sheep, and scanty yellow hair, which by careful brushing up from the side, managed more or less to cover the bald top of his head.

Mrs. Carson received him enthusiastically, and, when he began to make clear the object of his visit, she would have liked to have thrown herself at his feet, or to have done homage in some other form for his great condescension and the glorious prospects he opened up to her strongly-magimative mind.

"You see, my dear Mrs. Carson," he went on, after having opened the trenches in due form, "I have given the matter my consideration. I am not a young man to be led away by the phantom popularly called love, but your daughter Laura's many charms have been apparent to me for a long time, and I have come to the conclusion, after due deliberation, that she is fitted in every way to make me an excellent wife and the hall a desirable mistress."

You know I entertain a good deal of society, chiefly men of distinction in art and literature, and as many of these are married, I feel that a lady at the Hall is in all ways desirable.

"I should propose, in the event of your daughter accepting me, and of you, in the character of her mother and guardian, offering no objection, to settle some eight thousand pounds on her and her younger children; the eldest son—always supposing Providence blesses us with one—will of course, inherit the bulk of my property, landed and otherwise. I should also be prepared to settle a certain sum of pin-money—for dress, etcetera—on your daughter. My I hope that you see no objection to the marriage?"

It was only with the greatest diffidulty that Mrs. Carson withheld herself from flinging her arms round the knight's neck and kissing him there and then.

Objection! How could she have any objection? If she had sought for a husband for her dear Laura throughout the length and breadth of the land, she could not have found one to prefer to Sir Godfrey Lyzette, and Laura most fortunate girl to have attracted so wise and good a man.

She was so sorry the dear girls were out, but Sir Godfrey would stay.

They would be sure to be back to afternoon tea, but it would be better for her, perhaps, to apprise Laura of the honour in store for her.

A mother's yet very young and timid, and a mother's voice should be the first to speak of marriage to her.

So Godfrey acquiesced.

He knew a great deal more about Egyptian mummies than young ladies, and he felt that it would be a relief to have the way smoothed for him, not that the idea of being refused by Laura ever entered his mind.

He had pondered over the advisability of marriage for some time, and having concluded to enter the holy estate, and having selected the lady, he concluded all was settled.

Still, it would be doubtless best for the girl's mother to speak to her first, and as, after waiting for another half-hour, the sisters did not return, he rose to take his leave.

"Then, when shall we see you again, Sir Godfrey? Shall we say Friday afternoon?" Mrs. Carson asked sweetly.

The knight thought Friday afternoon would suit him very well.

Laura's mother clasped Sir Godfrey's cold, flabby hand with great warmth as she said "Good-bye."

It was a dreadfully formal leave-taking when her heart was so full.

But the proprieties must be respected, and, even to a future son-in-law, she dared not give way to her feelings.

For the next thirty minutes her eyes were never off the clock, and when at length Sarah and Laura returned, she did not even wait till they had taken off their hats before telling them what had happened.

Laura listened like one in a dream

After she had gathered that Sir Godfrey had asked her mother's consent, and was coming on Friday to propose to her in due form, she heard little more of what was said.

Once or twice a question, sharply repeated, roused her from her stupor, but she felt numb and chilled by the news, and her one desire was to get away to her own room.

She made her escape when the servant brought in the tea, and her mother and sister were too much engrossed with the all-absorbing topic to trouble themselves about her; so she sat at the dressing-table in her little room and cried till she felt quite exhausted, and then lay down on the bed and tried to think what she ought to do.

She told herself over and over again that she must not—could not—break her word to Philip, that her engagement; to him was sacred, and that of course, when Friday came, she would have to refuse Sir Godfrey.

But all the time, she felt herself shrink from the struggle before her, and deep down in her heart was a dark misgiving that, if her mother, Sarah, and Sir Godfrey only persevered, she would never be able to hold out.

At length she arrived at the conclusion to say as little as possible till Friday, and Sir Godfrey arrived, and then to hint that, having refused him, he would leave her in peace for good and all.

She bathed her eyes and came down to dinner, looking very pale and woe-begone, which elicited the remark from Sarah—who was eight years older than Laura, and took after her father, being small, red-faced, and sandy-haired—that Laura's affliction positively made her ill.

Mrs. Carson, however, was in a good temper, and left so proud of her younger daughter, that she snubbed Miss Sarah immediately.

"My dear pet," she said to Laura, "don't pay any attention to what your sister says. It is quite natural that Sir Godfrey's splendid, magnificent offer should try you a little. Such a change, my dear, from our humble little cottage to the Hall! And then, Sir Godfrey himself is such an amiable creature. You can't fail to be happy, and, with you to chaperon her, there is no saying that Sarah may not marry well yet."

The elder Miss Carson laughed—a laugh in which there was a great deal of spite and not an atom of mirth.

"Me—be chaperoned and patronized by my younger sister? No, thank you!" she exclaimed. "I dare say I may marry in good time, now the beauty of the family is disposed of. I wonder what Philip Lacy will say when he sees the announcement of the marriage in the papers? I suppose they do send an occasional paper out in those outlandish parts. He'll swear, of course—all soldiers do—and then he will be only too glad of the excuse to drink a little too much at mess."

"Sarah!" exclaimed her mother sharply.

"I will not have you talk like that. Philip Lacy was a well meaning fellow enough, though, of course, he cannot be mentioned in the same breath as Sir Godfrey. Once for all, I will not have any of your sneering remarks directed at your sister. You grow more like your father in person and temper every day, and what I put up with from him nobody but myself knows. Laura takes after me, and a sweeter temper never existed. If there is one thing I am thankful for more than another, it is that hers will never be tried as mine has been. Kiss me, my child, and to-morrow, and especially on Friday morning, mind you go out for a nice sharp walk, and get a little more color in your cheeks."

True to her resolve, Laura said nothing to her mother about her determination to refuse Sir Godfrey; but, as each hour passed, her heart sank lower and lower as the prospect of all she would have to endure came home to her.

At length the fatal hour arrived, and Laura nervd herself to meet the knight.

She had determined that, if Sir Godfrey persisted after she had declined the honor he proffered her, she would throw her self on his generosity, and tell him of her love for Philip.

She sat in the drawing room with her mother awaiting the knight's coming. Sarah had been sent out of the way, and when Sir Godfrey at length arrived, and, after a little desultory conversation, her mother made some excuse to leave the room, Laura felt very much as if she was being left alone to fight some dreadful monster determined to carry her off.

But before Mrs. Carson could reach the door, Sir Godfrey stopped her.

"Pray do not leave us, my dear madam," he said. "To you I have already expressed my hopes and wishes, and you have doubtless, as you yourself suggested, communicated them to Miss Laura. A main for me is to ask if my offer has been favorably received."

I hope that your daughter will bestow her hand on one who will endeavor to repay the great happiness she confers upon him."

Laura was taken utterly by surprise, and before she had time to realize her position her mother had answered for her.

"How delicate of you, dear Sir Godfrey," she exclaimed. "How extremely delicate! I am sure dear Laura appreciates it as much as I do. She fully returns your affection, Sir Godfrey, and accepts you, feeling deeply the great honor you do her."

"But mother—"

"My dear, it is better for me to speak for you, as Sir Godfrey has, with the greatest delicacy of feeling, permitted me to be present. Between mother and daughter there should never be any secrets, and I hope, at all events in this respect, I have brought my children up in the right way. If I do not say more, Sir Godfrey, it is to spare Laura's blushes. I am sure you will find her as good a wife as she has been to me a daughter," and the good lady wiped the tears from her eyes.

She rose from his chair, and took

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e made me extremely happy,

my dear Laura," he said, "and, in the future, it will be my task to try and make you happy. All arrangements you may leave to your mother and me; but if there is anything you would like, anything which may escape us, you have but to mention it to have your wish gratified."

And then, with a "God bless you, my dear," he stooped and kissed her forehead.

Timid by nature under the vigilance of her mother's eye, and utterly unprepared for the manner in which Sir Godfrey's proposal had been made, and her consent taken as already given, Laura sank back in her chair unable to find courage to face the scene that her first words would give rise to.

Almost before she was aware of it, she found herself alone with her mother.

"My dearest Laura, let your mother be the first to congratulate you," exclaimed Mrs. Carson, embracing her daughter. "Such a position as will be yours! And then such an amiable man, such a delicately minded man, such a generous man as Sir Godfrey for a husband! My dear, you don't seem to realize what a fortunate girl you are. There is not—"

Laura started to her feet.

"Heaven pardon you mother, for what you have done," she cried. "But I can't—oh, I can't marry him. You know how I and Philip love one another!"

"My goodness, Laura!" exclaimed Mrs. Carson indignantly, "am I never to hear the end of that silly business? Philip, indeed! Why, how can you compare him with such a man as Sir Godfrey? But I am not going to listen to any more of your silly sentimental rubbish. You have accepted Sir Godfrey, and you ought to feel shame to mention, or even to think of a soldier who's too poor to marry. Why, his aunt is not much older than I am, and may live for another fifty years. No, my dear, thank Providence for having a mother to look after your interests. All you have to do is to be quiet and amiable to Sir Godfrey. Just think of the position you will hold—of the pin money you will have to spend on dress! There is not a girl in the country that won't envy you."

In vain Laura pleaded that she might write to Sir Godfrey and tell him she could never love him, as her heart was already given to another.

To which her mother pointed out, first, that the knight had never asked her to love him, and then that he had selected her, doubtless in preference to many others to be a proper head to his establishment.

And then, as Laura still persisted, she flew into a passion, and upbraided her as an unnatural daughter, till the girl rushed from the room in tears, and sought shelter in her own chamber, where, with locked door, she gave herself up to despair.

The next morning Mrs. Carson read from the paper an account of a smart action in the Sudan.

There were the names of a few killed and wounded, and one officer was reported missing—Captain Philip Lacy.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE BRIDE'S RETURN.

Mrs. Carson was not one to hide her daughter's light under a bushel, and as Sir Godfrey had a great idea of his own dignity and importance, it was arranged that Laura should be married at the Abbey church at Churchford, with much pomp and ceremony.

Laura took little interest in the proceedings. Her mother suggested and ordered everything, even to the costumes of the bridesmaids, of whom there were four.

Two or three times Laura stole down to the little milliner, to whose house Philip's letters were to be addressed; but she came away each time with, it possible, a sadder heart, for there were none.

"He must be dead," she thought, "so what does it matter what becomes of me? Nothing can be worse than the life I should lead at home if I refused to marry Sir Godfrey, even if I had the courage to, which I have not."

The marriage had been hastened on, as Sir Godfrey had engagements at Rome that winter; so, one bleak December morning Laura knelt at the altar-rails and pledged herself to honor and obey the elderly gentleman beside her, and all Churchford herself so well off that she and Sarah spent a fortnight in London, buying dresses and other toilet necessaries, so as to be ready to welcome the bride on her return.

Sir Godfrey's town house was close to Sloane Square, and Mrs. Carson and Sarah were there to welcome Laura home.

She was so wonderfully changed in manner, that it quite took her mother's breath away.

She was no longer the timid girl who had wedded because she feared her mother's wrath.

She was a little tired from her journey, but she talked incessantly during dinner of all the gay people she had mixed with at Rome; of the balls and dinners she had been to; how she had always driven to the meet of the English foxhounds, and during the latter part of her stay had ridden to them, too; and of the thousand and one gaieties she had taken part in.

"My dear Sarah!" she exclaimed. "Do get out of that habit of sneering. You think I can't ride, but I have learnt. Major Fortescue took such pains to teach me. Such an agreeable man. Godfrey quite took to him."

"Major Fortescue was a well-informed man," supplemented the knight. "And I was extremely obliged to him for the attention he showed Laura. I was so engaged with my own affairs—Art, you are aware, my dear madam, has its home in Rome; that, really, he was a most convenient person to know. He seemed to delight in being of service, and was, as I think I remarked, for a soldier a well read man."

"He was charming!" exclaimed the bride. "He was devoted to me, and saved Godfrey any amount of escort duty. But there was quite a lot of nice men at Rome, and it was such a pity that you did not have me