

HELEN'S SECRET:

IN TWO INSTALMENT—PART II.

In spite of the fact that most of the liquid ran down her chin and on to her dress, the little she swallowed revived her.

'You are not well, Helen,' he said soothingly, when she was able to sit up. 'You had better go to your room, and I will write to you to-morrow. Here, take my arm; I will assist you upstairs. If we meet anyone on the way I will explain that you were attacked with sudden faintness.'

She made no resistance, but allowed him to take her to her room.

'Good-bye,' he whispered, hurriedly sweeping his mustached lip across her cheek. 'Take care of yourself, and look for a letter from me in a day or two.'

With a sigh of relief he saw her enter the room and close the door.

Shortly afterwards, Mr. Wyvern returned to town.

In vain Helen waited for the promised letter.

The days passed, but no communication came from him, except a short note to Mrs. Dimsdale.

Lady Laura Wyvern was convalescent. She had battled successfully with the extreme weakness consequent on her illness, and was fast returning to health.

But there was a shadow on her face, a heaviness in her eyes, which never changed.

The nurse—for only one now remained—was astonished that her ladyship made no mention of her child; but her consternation was great when Lady Laura said suddenly one day—

'Now, nurse, you may tell me all about my baby's death. Do not be afraid, I am quite prepared to hear everything.'

'But, my lady—'

'I have known it all the time, but I saw you wished to spare my feelings. I was quite prepared—I knew he would not live. Fate is against me, and has doomed me to a life of loneliness.'

Helen, coming in just in time to catch the words, uttered in a sad, resigned tone, rushed away again, falling into a passion of bitter weeping when she was alone.

The girl had grown very thin and haggard.

'People, knowing how much attached she was to her employer, imagined that her altered appearance was due to anxiety and watching.'

How could they guess that she was haunted by a demon of remorse which gave her no peace?

Her one hope, too—the single prop to which she clung, seemed to be slipping away from her.

The anxious watching for a letter, the sickening suspense, the continued disappointment, were beginning to tell seriously upon her health.

Lady Laura spoke to her at last.

'Helen,' she said kindly. 'I am getting quite worried about you. It we were not soon going abroad, I should send you away by yourself for a change and rest.'

'I am not ill, my lady.'

'Well, you look it. I spoke to Dr. Joyce the other morning, and he tells me that the change to Nice will soon put you right. You have taken my illness too much to heart, child. Now, put on your hat, and go for a brisk walk while the sun is shining; afterwards, if you feel able, you shall read me scraps from the papers. My eyes are not strong yet, the letters dance together when I have read for a few minutes.'

With a murmured word of thanks, Helen went off to do as she had been told.

CHAPTER V.

With quick, impatient steps, walking swiftly, with a keen longing to get away from herself for a space, Helen trod the damp road, crushing the sodden leaves, which lay in heaps as the wind had drifted them, at every step.

A soft, moist wind blew in her face, tingling it with a delicate shell-pink.

Her beautiful grey eyes lost something of their troubled expression as the blood coursed through her veins, stimulated by the exercise which she had so neglected lately.

Right along the Millford Road she went, over the brow of the hill, almost into the town itself, when the declining sun warned her that it was time to think of returning.

She was sorry to turn her back on the soft glow of the western sky and face the cold, grey east again.

She lingered a moment for one last look at the setting sun, and became so absorbed in her thoughts that she was totally unaware of the approach of a young man who was crossing a field at right angles to her.

In spite of his clerical garb, he vaulted lightly over the fence, and accosted the girl in an eager voice.

Receiving no reply, he laid his hand gently on her arm.

Helen turned round with a startled cry, her face paling to a sickly hue.

'Forgive me, Miss Vicars. I had no intention of frightening you, but you did not hear me speak.'

The young man's tone was exceedingly pleasant and refined, and he pressed warmly the hand Helen extended. Then, in a concerned voice, he added—

'You are not well. What is the matter?'

'I am quite well, thank you, only a little tired. I was about to return.'

He walked by her side, talking on in-

different subjects for a time, but presently he remarked inquiringly—

'I have not seen you in church lately?'

'No. Her ladyship has wanted me a great deal, and I have not cared to leave her.'

'I am afraid you have been confining yourself to the house too closely. Our duty to others must not make us forget the fact that we owe a duty to ourselves. You must forgive my repeating that I think you look quite ill.'

'Really, Mr. Ellis, I cannot see why you should trouble about my appearance,' Helen returned, almost irritably.

'I trouble,' he said simply, 'because it concerns me very nearly. Helen, I love you.'

She stood still a moment as though turned to stone, then a torrent of hot blood flooded her face.

'You love me?' she repeated incredulously.

'Yes. Is there anything surprising in the fact? I did not intend to speak to you until my appointment to the vicarage of Hillsborough is confirmed, but it is practically certain. Now you can understand why it distresses me to see you looking ill.'

'Mr. Ellis, I never dreamed of this,' faltered the girl. 'I am so sorry.'

His face fell.

'Miss Vicars, do you know I have been conceited enough to imagine sometimes that you entertained a slight regard for me?'

'I did—I do, but not in that way. I value your friendship, but I have never thought—'

'Will you think now? I love you with my whole heart, and if you will trust your future to me, I think I can make you happy.'

'It is utterly impossible,' she said, much moved by his earnestness. 'I can not marry you, but I thank you for the honor you have done me.'

'Do not speak so. My honor and pride would have been to call you my wife. If such happiness is denied me I must bear my disappointment, but I shall go on loving you as long as I live.'

'Please do not say such a thing. I am unworthy the love of a good man. Oh, Mr. Ellis, you little know how heavy my heart is. For your own sake root out every thought of, and—'

By a great effort she mastered her agitation.

Holding out her hand she said quietly—

'Good-bye. Let me go on alone, and try. I entreat you, to forget me.'

The curate took the proffered hand, and resisting the longing desire to clasp her in his arms, pressed his lips to it.

'I will not worry you; but I beg you will allow me to walk with you. It is getting dusk, and there may be tramps about. You shall not talk if you do not wish to.'

What could Helen do?

Such chivalrous devotion could not be repulsed.

Nevertheless, she was not sorry when the house came in sight, and she could part from him without discourtesy.

'Remember,' he said, as he wished her good-bye, 'I am always your friend. Do not hesitate to make use of me if I can ever do anything for you.'

'You are very kind,' she said, the tears rushing to her eyes.

He watched her enter the house, a wistful expression on his finely-cut face.

Lady Laura scrutinized Helen as she seated herself ready to read.

'You do not look much better for your walk, child. Does your head ache?'

'Not at all, thank you, my lady.'

'Well, here are the Queen and the Court Circular. Pick out any bits of interest, will you?'

Helen read several items, turning the pages over and scanning the columns with eyes rendered quick by experience.

Suddenly she paused, uttering a faint cry.

'It cannot be true! Oh, Lady Laura, it cannot be true!'

'What?'

Helen turned the paper towards the lady, who read:

'We understand that the engagement between Mr. Hilton Wyvern and Miss May Curzon, second daughter of the Hon. Arthur Curzon, was publicly announced last evening. There are certain romantic circumstances attaching to the case which make it peculiarly interesting, the lady refusing to accept the freedom offered her when the posthumous child of the late Captain Henry Wyvern, of Rushmead, proved to be a son, and consequently, the heir to the property. The speedy death of the little boy, however, who was delicate from his birth, has restored Mr. Wyvern to his original position. The marriage will, we believe be celebrated in the spring.'

'What is there so startling in this announcement?' said Lady Laura.

'Did you know of it?'

'I knew that Hilton was in love with the girl, though I think it would have been in better taste—she added bitterly—'if they had waited a little longer before publishing it.'

'He is a bad, cruel man!'

'Helen! Ah, I see how it is. Hilton has been making love to you, and you feel

aggrieved at his engagement. I gave you credit for more sense, my dear. He is a man who pays attention to every attractive woman he meets; but you surely did not imagine for a moment that his intentions were serious?'

'I am afraid I was stupid enough even for that,' answered Helen, speaking in a calm voice, nothing of her agitation remaining but a deadly whiteness. 'He told me long ago that I was the only woman he loved, and we have been engaged for nearly a year.'

'I'll warrant he bound you to the strictest secrecy?'

Helen admitted this was so.

'I can understand everything except your being so gullible as to imagine that Hilton Wyvern would ever marry you—for that is what you expected, is it not?'

'May I ask, my lady, why you should consider such an event out of the bonds of possibility? I am not low-born, uneducated, or ugly.'

'My dear child, you are not unsuitable in any way in my opinion, but Hilton is an utterly selfish man who would marry no woman who could not advance his interests. I should have thought you had sufficient penetration to discover so much yourself.'

'You see, I trusted in and believed him,' the girl replied.

Asking to be excused, she rose and left the room.

Lady Laura was greatly concerned at the unexpected turn of affairs.

She was fond of Helen, and felt disgusted with her kinsman.

Her first impulse was to write and expostulate with him on his duplicity, but reflecting that this would do little good, and being also of a peace-loving nature, she decided to let the matter rest.

She watched Helen anxiously during the following days, and when the girl asked permission to go to town, she regarded her with dismay.

'Helen you would never dream—'

'I want to go and see my brother-in-law,' the girl said coldly. 'I did not tell you that he lost his wife during your illness.'

'Oh! poor man. Where does he live?'

'In Chelsea.'

'Well, go by all means. Perhaps the little journey will cheer you up. I shall be glad for your sake, as well as my own, when we leave England.'

CHAPTER VI.

Mr. Wyvern put his latch key in the door; at the same moment someone from inside pulled the door open.

It was his landlady, dressed to go out, and stifling with difficulty her evident impatience.

'I think, sir, you said you are dining out this evening, and that you leave early to-morrow?'

'Yes, Mrs. Yates; that is so,' he returned, looking surprised.

'Because I am going out, and as I have given my girl a holiday, I wished to know if there is anything you will be wanting.'

'I think not, thank you. I suppose the bath-water is hot?'

'Yes; and the boy is in the kitchen if you want anything fetched.'

'I shall see you in the morning before I go.'

'Very well, sir. Oh, I forgot!' she exclaimed, as he was turning away. 'There is a lady waiting for you.'

'A lady waiting for me?' he repeated, in a bewildered tone.

'Yes, sir. She came about an hour—and a half ago, and insisted on remaining until your return.'

'Who is she?'

'She did not give her name. Good-evening, sir,' Mrs. Yates hurried off lest she should be hindered by any more questions.

With a puzzled air, Hilton Wyvern mounted the stairs and opened the door of the sitting room.

'Helen!'

He uttered her name with angry surprise as his visitor turned from the window to meet him.

'Yes, it is I, she replied; and, in spite of his annoyance, he noticed the change in her tone and manner.

Instead of rushing into his arms, her face lighted up with loving smiles, she stood calmly erect, her mouth set closely, her grey eyes regarding him disinterestedly.

'Is—anything the matter?' he faltered.

'Nothing of any consequence to you. I simply want confirmation from your own lips of a newspaper paragraph. Is it true that you are formally engaged to Miss May Curzon?'

'What do you mean?'

He spoke to gain time, but the dull color which mounted to his cheek told its own tale.

'I read the notice in the Queen, and I want you to tell me if it is correct.'

'Supposing it is?' he retorted, stung to defiance by her icy tone.

'You are engaged to be married to the girl I have named?'

'Yes; since you will have it.'

'You cared for her—there was a secret understanding between you—while you were making love to me, and vowing that the desire of your heart was to make me your wife?'

'Well?'

'Is it true?'

'I may as well admit it is true, since the papers have been so confoundedly smart. It was bound to come out before long. Helen,' he blurted out, overcome for the moment by a touch of manly shame. 'I'll admit I have treated you badly, but you were a bit of a goose to be taken in so readily. In spite of the pretty fictions of story-writers you must be aware that men in my position very, very rarely marry girls in yours.'

'Then you meant nothing from the first—you never loved me?'

'I cared very much, and, if you had been rich and higher in rank, I would have married you willingly. My betrothed, though a nice girl, cannot hold a candle to you for looks and style. No, my dear, do

not suppose I did not care for you—I do now, in fact. Let us talk this matter over sensibly, and see if we cannot come to some sort of arrangement.'

Deceived by her calm, quiet bearing, secretly relieved that the disagreeable task of acquainting her with his perfidy was over, his spirits rose, and he determined to brazan it out to the end.

'There is no arrangement to make. You have basely deceived two women, and possibly the one who is to be honored with your hand is the more to be pitied. I thank you for speaking with such brutal frankness; and now I have one more question to ask. If you will answer that truly, I shall be perfectly satisfied, and will go away.'

'What is it?'

'Is it true that the lady refused to cancel the engagement when you believed yourself to be penniless?'

'She had nothing to say in the matter. Her father broke it off at once. He, naturally, would not permit his daughter to marry a man who had no means of keeping her.'

'Naturally.'

A slow, peculiar smile broke the rigid line of her lips.

'But now that the little heir is dead, and you are the owner of Rushmead and the accumulated fortune of the late Captain Wyvern, the gentleman puts no obstacles in the way of your union with his daughter?'

'That is precisely how the case stands. And now, perhaps, you will tell me your object in coming here this evening.'

'I wonder you ask. Is it not perfectly naturally that I should desire to hear from your own lips the tale of your treachery and faithlessness? I have felt instinctively for some time that your regard for me was waning, and I am thankful to say that your falsehood has quite cured me of the foolish love I gave so ungrudgingly.'

Men are vain creatures at heart.

Instad of being glad that she took his desertion so quietly, his amour propre was wounded by her independent declaration.

'That is what you say,' he retorted; 'but you know in your heart you love me still.'

'You are quite mistaken,' she returned, and the quietly-uttered words were more convincing than the most violent asseverations. 'A woman does not often continue to give her love when it is no longer valued; but when she has fallen so low as to commit a crime for the sake of the man she cares for, then all happiness must be at an end.'

'What do you mean?'

He was staring at her with incredulous eyes. Had this affair upset her reason? 'I mean,' she went on in a passionless voice 'that I loved you with a love which blinded my judgment, and when I sinned for your sake, I did not realize the millstone I was hanging round my neck. I tell you I have not had a single happy moment since that day.'

'What day? I am quite at sea.'

'You remember the night the baby was supposed to die?'

'Supposed to die?'

His countenance paled to an ashy whiteness as he gripped her arm; a cold horror crept into his eyes.

'Helen explain yourself. You have lied. You vowed to me that you did not harm the child.'

'Nor did I,' she replied, shrinking from his fierce gaze. 'I would not have hurt him for all the world.'

'Then what is the meaning of your extraordinary words?'

'The heir did not die!'

He stood still, only partially comprehending.

'I took him away and substituted my sister's dead child.'

Hilton Wyvern looked at the girl with menacing eyes, and shook her roughly by the arm.

'Beware how you play any of your confounded tricks on me!' he hissed. 'You don't expect me to swallow such a stupid lie as that?'

'It is the simple truth, and I came to London today for the sole purpose of righting the cruel wrong. The child is with my brother in law. It was he who brought his dead baby to Rushmead the night Lady Laura was so ill, and I met him just outside the park gates and gave him the little heir, all muffled up in a dark shawl. I took the dead baby back to the house, and, after re-dressing him, put him in the heir's crib. And he was buried, as you know, in the family vault.'

In spite of himself, he was bound to believe her.

The plain, unvarnished truth invariably carries conviction with it.

'You are a fiend!' he cried at last, but Helen did not quail. 'If your villainous tale is true you have placed yourself in a pretty plight.'

'I am ready to take my punishment. Anything is better than the torture I have been enduring.'

'When did your conscious first become so exceedingly tender?'

But Helen, whose strength had gradually been ebbing away, sank down in a chair and closed her eyes.

For the first time it had struck her how white and thin she had become.

He reached a spiritied stand and poured some brandy into a glass, diluting it with very little water.

When the girl had swallowed it she revived.

CHAPTER VII.

'And now, if you please, we will go on with this discussion,' the young man said, after a pause. 'I see plainly your clever little plan. You come and spring this wonderful story as a means of frightening me into doing as you desire. If I take you by the hand and promise to lead you straight to hymenial altar—no, do not interrupt, please—the heir of Rushmead may live and die in the obscurity to which you have consigned him; but if I refuse to

marry you, I am to suffer loss of fortune and my betrothed bride at one sweep.

'It won't do, Helen. You are very clever, I admit; but you have overshot the mark. Self preservation is the first law of nature; it becomes necessary for me to look to myself. If I cannot keep the heir out of sight, though I am by no means sure I shall not try, I will at least, secure my wife before your pretty little comedy is published to the world. It would be rough luck to lose all.'

'What are you going to do?'

'I am going to find a nice quiet lodging for you, where you will have no inducement to talk, and no one to listen to you if you did.'

She started, and moved instinctively towards the door, but he smilingly barred the way.

'We are in the house alone, let me tell you,' he continued. 'You have too much good sense to attempt to attract notice by calling out; your presence in bachelor apartments uninvited would betray great indiscretion, to say the least, and would require a deal of explaining to Lady Laura Wyvern.'

She reddened and paled alternately under his fixed gaze.

'Don't you suppose her ladyship will seek to discover my whereabouts if I do not return tonight?'

'You will write her a little note at my dictation, which will allay all anxiety.'

'Very well.'

Helen seemed suddenly to have grown indifferent.

He eyed her suspiciously.

'Supposing you can manage to keep me hidden until you are married—what then?'

'I think I should ask you that question. I shall give you an opportunity of making your escape if you choose to take it.'

She came to a sudden resolution.

'Supposing I agree to leave the country now—to start by the next steamer which sails for the antipodes. Will that suit you?'

'Do you mean it?'

'Yes.'

'It would certainly be your wisest course. You know, of course, that you have rendered yourself liable to imprisonment.'

She covered her face with her hands and shuddered.

Perhaps, for the first time the reality the position came forcibly to her.

She had been borne up on the wings of lofty resolve, the earnest desire to retrieve a cruel wrong; but now the crude shame of the thing burst upon her in its nakedness she had been guilty of the vulgar crime of kidnapping a child!

Hot waves of colour swept over her—every nerve tingled.

How could she face the bitter humiliation of public disgrace?

Her resolve to bear bravely the punishment of her sin melted like hoar-frost in a sudden thaw; she became frantically anxious to get away and hide somewhere.

Raising her white, terrified face to the cynical one regarding her, she said—

'I will go right away from every body, Hilton. I dare not face the exposure!'

Impressed by her earnestness, he began to hope again.

Perhaps, after all, he would be able to turn aside the hurricane which threatened to overwhelm him.

But there was no time to lose.

Consultation of time-tables showed that a boat left Liverpool for New York at eleven o'clock the following morning.

Travelling by the midnight train from Euston would give Helen ample time to catch it, and there were sure to be plenty of berths at this time of year.

She was willing for him to arrange everything.

His first action was to go out and send off three wires—one to engage a place for her on the boat, one to make an excuse for not dining with his friend, and the third to Lady Laura.

Returning to his rooms an hour later as fast as a hansom could bring him—even then not wholly certain of Helen—he found to his relief, she was still there, sitting in the same position in which he had left her.

'I have sent word to Lady Laura that you are unavoidably detained in town. We must presently concoct a letter to throw her off the scent,' he announced, airily. 'It has never occurred to me—have you any luggage?'

'Only this little hand bag.'

'Well, that won't be enough to start with. You had better come with me; we shall be able to get what you will require at the other side of London, where the shops do not close so early. A dollar about money? How much have you?'

'I have drawn out all I had in the bank—ninety-five pounds. I did not know what I should want.'

'You have it there?'

'Yes, in my bag. It is all in notes, except ten pounds.'

'Under the circumstances, it is fortunate you have it. We will set off at once, as it is getting late, and after we have done what shopping is necessary we will have some dinner. I shall accompany you to Liverpool and see you off.'

'There is no need,' she answered coldly. 'I should prefer going alone.'

'I am afraid you will have to put up with my company so far, though, if you find my society so distasteful, we can travel in separate compartments.'

'You are afraid I shall change my mind at the last minute and not go at all?'

'I would certainly rather see you safely on board.'

Once more a strange smile flitted across her pale face.

'I cannot think how I ever have loved you!' she said. 'You have not the slightest faith in me, and I can see plainly that all your thoughts and anxiety are for yourself. Hilton Wyvern, you are a very selfish, egotistic man.'

She uttered the words in the calm tones of one pronouncing an indisputable fact.

He smiled in a shame-fused manner.

'You can tell me what you like; but if I am working in my own interest you must