

A Circlet of Love.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS—PART I.

'Jerom!' she gasped, clinging to him in an agony of despair strangely mingled with loathing and with dread. 'You would not kill him?'

'Keep back!' he ejaculated fiercely, trying to shake her off.

'I cannot, Jerom, forbear! You know not what you are doing.'

Her words, uttered in those clear, pure tones, had a calming effect on him none others could have had.

Slowly his hands relaxed their hold, and turning abruptly away he muttered hoarsely:

'Come. I leave him in his guilt.'

With one swift, short, compassionate glance towards the senseless form of Kenard, Esther followed her husband in silence, her fair head bent like a wind-tossed flower, her sweet eyes shadowed with an expression of surpassing sadness and regret and fear.

'Have your things packed, Lady Farquhar. We leave Paris tomorrow morning.'

'It is sudden,' Esther faltered. 'Has anything happened to compel you to return?'

Sir Jerom gnashed his teeth.

'After all that took place this morning, how can you—how dare you ask that question?'

'Forgive me, Jerom.'

He looked at her for a moment in silence, but there was no mercy in that look, and as she stretched out her hands in mute entreaty he shuddered and turned away as though her very touch was loathsome to him.

'You have outraged my feelings far beyond forgiveness,' he said, the blue veins swelling on his forehead.

'Once I told you I must either love or hate you. I loved you then, now I hate you!'

'No, no!' she cried wildly; 'have pity, my husband, do not mar my whole life because I forgot my duty for a few brief moments.'

'Silence!' he commanded with a sudden savage lowering of the brow. 'Henceforth you will be my wife in name only—the mistress of Westlea. Never call me husband again, never raise your eyes to mine with more than a passing stranger's glance do not recall to me, by word or look, the hateful bond that links us together, lest I forget you are a woman, and crush you as I would this trait insect.'

As he spoke he caught at a moth that was flitting round a candle, and when he opened his hand a tiny heap of dust was lying in his palm.

CHAPTER IV.

The village bells rang out joyously, sun-burnt men and women had ceased their toil, and stood at their cottage gates to welcome the master of Westlea and his beautiful young bride to the old Abbey.

Troops of rosy, ragged children lined the white winding road, making the balmy air ring with their glad voices as they carpeted the ground with flowers.

'This reception is pleasing,' and the baronet's moustache dropped sarcastically, 'and one well suited to a happy pair returning from their honeymoon; yet, if I mistake not your expectations are defeated. Did you look for more from these rustics?'

Esther shivered, and he noticed with cruel enjoyment the tears that rose to her eyes at his mocking words.

'Spare me further torture,' she said faintly; 'or I shall go mad.'

The bells still clanged out, the children still flung the dewy blossoms in the air, yet amidst all that tumultuous joy one heart was slowly breaking, one heart was steeped in despair.

With the swift, silent motion of a somnambulist, Esther ascended the broad marble steps. Once she faltered, and Sir Jerom, thinking she would fall, took her hand, and placed it on his arm.

'Do not touch me,' she whispered, snatching it passionately away. 'I would fall rather than receive help from you!'

'Fool!' he muttered under his breath.

'Do you not see our actions are watched? Before she could answer he threw his arm high round her, and with his lips still pressed savagely together, bent down to kiss her.

With a recoiling shudder she broke from the mock embrace, and hurrying through the lighted hall fled to her own chamber.

'How much of this must I endure?' she exclaimed, pressing her hands to her throbbing temples. 'Oh, that I could die! that I could die!'

She looked wistfully, yearningly about her. Hitherto she had not noticed the absence of her father and sisters, but now in her dull loneliness she remembered that they who should have been foremost had not yet bade her welcome.

'Perhaps someone is ill,' she soliloquised a new fear dawning upon her. 'I will go at once to the vicarage and—'

She paused and drew herself erect, her heart beating wildly at the daring of her own thought.

'Why did I not think of that before? Yes, yes; I will go now and entreat them to take me back—to save me from a life of thralldom and misery.'

She drew her cloak more tightly about her trembling form and hastened from the elegant room, that to her seemed but a gilded cage.

Although the day was warm her teeth chattered, and she shivered convulsively as she hurried along the corridors.

She stopped as she passed the library. Should she tell Sir Jerom she was leaving the Abbey? Did he deserve even that much from her?

Ay, surely, surely.

With a quick movement she flung the door open, and entering closed it softly after her.

'I am come, Sir Jerom,' she said, going up to him almost haughtily, 'to tell you I am going home.'

'This is your home. What do you mean?'

'This can never be my home. I am going back to the vicarage—to my father.'

A cruel smile lurked at the corners of the baronet's mouth, and his eyes glittered with a savage sinister meaning under his bent brows.

'Perhaps you will be disappointed when I tell you a heart no longer beats for you with a father's affection, a voice will never call you daughter again.'

A sharp cry of agony broke from her white lips, and staggering back she leaned heavily against a chair for support.

'Jerom!' she almost shrieked, 'what have you said? He is not—he is not dead?'

He watched her with a tiger-like satisfaction, and after a pause said slowly: 'Dead! Well, no; he is not dead.'

'Thank Heaven! If he breathes there is hope.'

She went eagerly towards the door, then, as if some sudden thought had crossed her brain, turned and confronted her husband again.

'One word, Sir Jerom, before I go. What motive had you in keeping me in ignorance of my father's illness?'

'Illness?' and he raised his heavy brow in well-feigned astonishment. 'There is some mistake, I think; the vicar, as far as bodily strength is concerned, was never in better health than now.'

Esther looked at him in silence.

Gradually the horrified expression his first words had called forth faded, a crimson wave swept over her white, wan face, and her delicate nostrils quivered with the intensity of her feelings.

'I see, I see, Sir Jerom,' she exclaimed, flashing him a glance of burning scorn. 'You are torturing me for pastime, as a cat tortures a bird. Ah, when I swore to be your wife how little did I know the man to whom I had bound myself.'

She pushed open the door, but the baronet started up quickly and banging it to, turned the key in the lock.

'Stay,' he hissed; 'read this before you start on your fool's errand,' and he threw an opened letter on the table.

She glanced at it almost indifferently, then, seeing it was addressed to her by her father, snatched it up angrily.

'How dare you keep my letters?' she demanded, meeting his gaze steadily.

A hoarse laugh was his only answer; but of late she had grown used to that forced, hollow mirth and scarcely heeded it.

With trembling haste she unfolded the letter, and Sir Jerom, watching her as she read, saw her give a quick convulsive start as the lovely face blanched, and the dark eyes grew wide and fixed.

As it suddenly transformed to stone she stood with one cold hand pressed over her heart, powerless to move, powerless to speak.

Something in the rigid pallor of her face frightened him. The cruel smile left his lips, and going over to a side-table he filled a glass with wine and tried to force some between her set teeth.

With a desperate, breathless effort she raised her arm and dashed the glass to the ground.

'How do I know,' she panted, 'it is not poison?'

A smothered oath escaped Sir Jerom's lips.

'Take care, madam, take care what you say,' he hissed, livid with rage, 'or you may have cause to repent.'

'Spare yourself further words,' she said, her clear scornful tones striking across his harsh voice like the chime of a silver bell amid the clangour of brass cymbals.

'I heed not your threats. After this,' crushing the letter passionately, 'I care not what you do.'

'Ah! the contents of that letter are distasteful to you,' he said, ironically.

'You spared no pains in causing them to do so,' she answered bitterly.

'I did my duty. It was right your father should know the truth.'

'Truth! You must have lied to him—poured words like venom in his ears, ere he wrote this!'

The baronet opened his lips to deal her a keen shaft from his tongue; but with a contemptuous sweep of her white hand she silenced him.

'Enough! Say no more, lest you plunge yourself too deeply in deceit and falsehood, and before he could recover himself she had left his presence.

Not until she was once more in her own room—the room she thought she had left forever—did her courage and strength forsake her; then all the defiance died out of her eyes, and the woman who a moment earlier had made a strong man cower beneath her scornful dignity, sank hopelessly and despairingly to the ground.

'Oh, heavens!' she cried, putting her hands wearily to her head, 'what have I done to deserve this?'

Presently she raised herself, and smoothing the letter she still grasped feverishly, read over and over again the condemning words written therein:

'You have broken my heart!—no word of endearment, not even her name—and God forgive you for it. I cannot. Do not suppose that your father has condemned you on the word of your husband alone. When he wrote me of your guilt, he gave me such information as was necessary for me to seek for proof. I have accepted a living in Warwickshire, and leave the rectory without delay. Shall we ever meet again? Yes, when you can say, "Father, I have plucked the memory of my folly from my heart, and am a true wife, it not a loving one." Then, not until then, can we meet under the same roof.'

'Oh, my father!' she exclaimed, letting the paper slip through her nerveless fingers. 'When shall I be able to deny that I love him? Love him! did I say? Ah, no, no! for mad unmeasured love such as that would be a sin.'

Brokenly, breathlessly, the words fell from her pale lips, her head drooped, and burning tears dimmed at last the lustre of her eyes.

CHAPTER V.

Seven days drifted by—long, dismal days that brought with them no sunshine, no joy to warm the cold, dull, despairing heart of the mistress of Westlea, and as she restlessly paced the long, deserted picture-gallery, she could scarcely realize only one week had passed since her return.

'How slowly the time creeps on!' she murmured half aloud. 'Is it always so with the wretched, I wonder?'

She thought of the dreary years that lay before her with a sickening dread.

Joined to the man for whom she could never care, severed from the one who had awakened such a strange, unaccountable, sweet sympathy within her, life could be but a bleak desolate waste.

'Will these unmeasured links ever be made even? Can they be severed, or must I be chained to misery forever?'

She ceased her listless walking, leaned wearily against an old ebony secretary that was placed at the dark end of the gallery.

In an instant she shrank back with a low startled cry.

The weight of her body had forced some hidden spring; there was a sharp click, and the massively carved lid fell back with a hollow echoing sound.

'What have I done?' she exclaimed fearfully, as a heap of papers fell to the ground.

Sinking on her knees, she gathered them up, and was hastily thrusting them into the worn eastern pigeon holes, when something arrested her attention—something that caused the fair hands to tremble like aspen leaves, the beautiful mobile face to grow colorless as a wild white lily.

Yet it was not much—only a little china miniature, a portrait of a beautiful woman; but in those black, glittering, jewel-like eyes, in the ruby mouth, with its bow-like curves, Esther recognized the features of Gabrielle Geffroi, the woman who had cast the first shadow over her happiness.

'And he told me she was nothing to him,' she murmured, as she skimmed through a bundle of letters written in French, 'although even when he married me she was his promised wife. He shall never see this again.'

With a sudden angry gleam in her dark eyes she hurled the miniature from her, and it fell to the ground, shattered into a thousand pieces.

'So, my lady, it is thus you spend your time, prying into my secrets.'

Esther started to her feet at sound of that cold, sneering voice.

Her attention had been so absorbed in the letters that she had not heard Sir Jerom's stealthy footfall, and was, until now, unconscious of his presence.

'I hope you have not discovered anything that has aroused your jealousy.'

'You forget, Sir Jerom,' she retorted, her lip curling with a quiet scorn, 'jealousy is a suspicion attending love.'

He ground his teeth savagely.

'No more of this bantering, madam,' he exclaimed roughly; 'what right had you to destroy my letters and—that picture?'

'A wife's right to expel from her home tokens of her husband's guilt.'

'This is more than I can bear. If you were a man I would strangle you for having forced that door open.'

'You are mistaken,' Esther said, a faint tinge of color spreading itself slowly over her cheeks; 'but for an accident I should have known nothing of this.'

'Do not lie to me,' he muttered, grasping her arm fiercely.

'I would stoop to lie to no man, and you know it. Let go my arm, Sir Jerom.'

But his cruel grasp tightened, and it was only by a great effort she kept back the cry of pain that rose to her lips.

'Be careful,' she said quietly, 'or you will bruise my shoulder, and in evening dress—'

'You would not dare—'

She raised her eyes fearlessly to his, and he gazed beneath the clear, penetrating, contemptuous gaze.

'Do not challenge me. All the despair that was in my heart has changed to desperation. I would dare anything.'

He looked at her for a moment in silent surprise as she stood amongst the fragments of torn letters, her lips, supple form drawn to its full height, her hands folded on her breast, and her hair gleaming to a dusky gold in the dim light.

In that calm, defiant attitude there was much of courage and of majesty, and Sir Jerom knew what he had lost in missing the love and trust of the woman before him.

out noticing the interruption, 'that you are to wear the family diamonds.'

'Are you proud of my beauty, that you would have it shown to the greatest advantage?'

'Proud!' he exclaimed bitterly. 'Do you think I can feel aught of pride for the face that has blighted my whole existence? The sight of it is hateful to me. I wish I might never look upon it again!'

Without another word he turned on his heel, and Esther was left once more alone with her thoughts.

'Yes, yes,' she said resolutely, as the last sound of his step died away on the stair. 'I will do it—it will be better so.'

It was past midnight, yet, late as was hour, the ponderous door of the Abbey was thrown open, and sounds of music and of laughter came floating out on the dark dreary silence.

To a lonely passerby the outside presented a pleasing aspect; to those assembled within it seemed as though they had entered the mystic regions of Fairyland.

Smiling, bright-eyed maidens, moving hither and thither in their shimmering robes, looked like gorgeous flowers, while Esther, with the flash of diamonds and purple and gold about her, shone in their midst fair as a star.

All who gazed on her marvelled that one so divinely beautiful should have chosen for her husband the sullen, heavy-browed, middle-aged baronet.

'You and Sir Jerom remind me of the "Beauty and the Beast," remarked a dashing young officer, as he led her from the supper table.

Esther started, and her face grew ghastly white.

'I fear I have offended you!' he exclaimed in a tone of self-reproach. 'Forgive me, Lady Farquhar, I should not have spoken thus.'

'Oh, no; it is not that,' she replied with a forced smile; 'the heat of the room is so oppressive, it makes me feel faint.'

'Would you like to walk out on the terrace? It is cooler there.'

'Yes. All this glitter and movement make my eyes ache.'

Lord Chivalry looked at her questioningly. Those simple words accompanied as they were by a weary gesture of the delicate hands, spoke more eloquently than she would have wished.

'I think there is a storm brewing,' he said, as they stepped from the long casement.

She glanced at the dull, leaden, riftless sky and shivered.

'I am afraid I am unwise in bringing you here,' her companion said, 'Had we not better return to the ball room? The terrace is entirely deserted.'

'Nay, I shall enjoy the quiet,' she answered with fervid haste. 'If you would be kind enough to fetch me a shawl—and—my fan!'

With pleasure. I should have thought of that before.'

'Thank Heaven he is gone!' she exclaimed, as he disappeared between the azure curtains. 'I thought this hour would never come!'

In one brief moment her aspect entirely changed. The smile she had forced her lips to wear throughout the long evening left her, her face became set, her brow stamped with an unwavering resolution.

'Now—now!' she murmured under her breath, 'or it will be—too late!'

Drawing her silken robes closely around her, she hurried down the moss-grown steps, and turning into a dark narrow passage, ascended a flight of steep rickety steps that led to the west wing of the Abbey, where her own apartments were situated.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, all the domes were gathered in the servants' hall below; or if they had seen her they must have wondered at her unwanted appearance there, at the strangely wild face and quick smothered breathing.

She paused when she reached her own chamber, and peered cautiously in.

All was still and silent as the grave. Entering, she closed the door and turned the key noiselessly in the lock.

'I must be quick,' she panted as she flung off her costly dress, 'lest they find me and stay my flight.'

With almost frantic haste she tore the blazing jewels from her neck and arms, heedlessly cutting the soft flesh in dragging the rings from her trembling fingers.

Suddenly she paused. She cast off every gem without thought, without regret; but she faltered as she gazed at the little circlet of gold that still gleamed on her left hand.

'Why shrink from dealing with this as I have dealt with the rest?' she asked herself bitterly. 'Is it dearer to me? Ah, no. Thus do I sever at least one link—the most fatal of them all! and drawing it from her finger, she let it roll unheeded to her feet.

'Now I cannot withdraw from my purpose. Henceforth I shall be but a guilty worthless thing on this earth, although it is with a faint hope of doing good I commit this great sin.'

Without giving herself time for reflection she seized a dark cloak, and wrapped it tightly about her head and shoulders.

They cannot have missed me yet.'

Her voice was drowned in a long peal of thunder, and a vivid flash of lightning darted before her eyes.

'Is this storm sent to aid me in my escape, or is it—'

She stopped, unable to utter the fearful thought that coursed through her brain.

Swiftly, silently, she descended the old crazy stairs, nor did she pause until, almost breathless, she reached the foot of the terrace.

'Husband,' she exclaimed, stretching her arms out towards the brilliantly-lighted windows with a wild wistful passion, 'I feel no remorse, no shame, for what I am doing. You have driven me to it. I go for your sake, because the sight of my face is hateful to you. Jerom! Jerom! you have blighted my life, and from you I ask no pardon; from the cold, unfeeling, careless

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world, no pity.'

She turned away with a hard, tearless sob, and plunged into a dense thicket of tall, straight, odoriferous pines.

The air had become almost suffocating in its intense heat, and at short intervals the thunder roared with a sullen ominous boom.

Headless of the warning sound Esther fled with the speed of a hare over the mossy ground.

On, on she went knowing not, caring not what track she was following only rushing on faster, faster as if for dear life.

Great drops of rain began to fall with heavy dull splashes; louder and louder clashed the thunder, while the lightning darted around her like serpents of fire.

And through it all she ran with unflinching courage, now almost blinded by the piercing light, now stunned by the deafening roar that made the earth vibrate with its cannon-like echo.

At last her step could no longer be heard in the short intervals of silence. Nothing broke the momentary stillness but the constant patter, patter of the rain.

Hours after, when the storm was raging at its greatest fury, a horseman came galloping through the darkness. His face was white and stern, great beads of perspiration stood on his brow, and he ground his teeth savagely as he pressed his heels mercilessly into the bleeding flanks of his steed.

'Had I foreseen this,' he muttered, with fierce vehemence, 'I think I should have killed her.'

He urged his panting steed on with renewed energy, bounding recklessly over wide tangled hedges and wading through deep silent pools in his mad career.

Suddenly there fell a thunder bolt that seemed to set the whole earth ablaze, a long rolling boom rent the air, a terrific crash came up from the knotted woodlands, and more than one mighty oak lay shivered on the ground.

A dead dark silence followed. All now was still save the little rivulet that surged through the glen, and the terrified trembling horse that dashed forward, guided no longer by a masterhand, but burthened with a ghastly, stiffened corpse.

Then there was a prolonged quivering neigh, a dull thud, and when next the lightning flickered through the trees, it revealed the lifeless form of Sir Jerom lying face downwards on the sward.

CHAPTER VI.

The drowsy eye of the day, softly opening, beamed tenderly on the earth, imparting a pale, peaceful calm to everything around.

At the threshold of a low thatched cottage lay a woman, motionless, colourless, and lovely as a stricken flower.

There was no sign of life in those weary outstretched limbs, no regular rising and falling of the quiet bosom on which the fair hands were clasped, to give hope that the heart beat ever so faintly beneath.

There was a solemn, weird stillness until the first bright sunbeam burst through the dusky veil of morn, then on the silence of that lonely place there came the tremulous tender sound of the lark singing; soft sweet winds swept up the dewy scents of mosses and of leaves and of wild blossoms a wreath of blue smoke curled from the cottage chimney; the snowy window curtains were drawn aside and everything seemed to awake with new life—every thing save that white beautiful face upturned to the cloudless sky.

Presently the door opened from within and a stalwart yeoman stepped into the porch followed by a boy.

'What a calm there is, father,' the child whispered, 'now the tempest has passed away. What is that?' he broke off, grasping the man's arm. 'Look, father, look! someone is lying across our path!'

Without a word Quinton Crewe bent over the unconscious figure, and with hands gentle as a woman's raised the dropped head.

'Call your mother, Casper,' he exclaimed hurriedly. 'Haste, boy; don't stand there like a calf!'

Tenderly they lifted the mistress of Westlea from the cold ground, and placing

CONTINUED ON PAGE FIFTEEN.