

A Circlet of Love.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS—PART I.

CHAPTER I.

'And you will be my wife?'
'Why so often repeat that question, Sir Jerom?'
'The answer is an easy one, yet it is all sufficient. Esther, I love you.'
'And you wish for nothing more?'
'I do not understand you.'
'I know you do not,' very quietly; 'but, Sir Jerom, when two people kneel before the hymenal altar, should there not be an equal share of affection in both their hearts?'
'Sir Jerom Farquhar knitted his brow.
'My darling, why do you hesitate? Love must always follow marriage. What matters it if one heart is cold for a little while? Esther, grant me this promise—be my wife, and I swear I will make your life a happy one. Trust yourself to me, and I will do anything—everything to gain your love.'
For a moment Esther Lisle stood silently before him, her great dark eyes raised to his with a troubled expression in their mellow depths, an expression of mingled doubt and fear—doubt as to whether it would be a crime to wed one she did not love; fear lest by refusing she should wreck his life.
'Be merciful, Esther,' he said, taking her white hands tenderly in his; 'remember how dearly I love you.'
'Sir Jerom, I cannot—oh, I know not now to decide.'
'Let me decide for you, sweetheart.'
She shook her head gravely and the bright hair dripping over her fair brow shone like burnished gold in the blue starlight.
'If I loved you,' she murmured, trembling, 'I could—'
'Tell me,' Sir Jerom interrupted almost fiercely, 'do you care for anyone else?'
'In the way you mean, no.'
'Then, my darling, why are you loth to plight your troth to me?'
'Because,' she cried passionately, 'I am afraid—afraid lest I should never know the great love you speak of.'
'How hard you are to win!' he exclaimed, looking wistfully into the beautiful flushed face. 'A heart less strong, less earnest than mine would tire of the seemingly hopeless struggle to gain yours, but my great love gives me courage to win you in spite of yourself. Esther, you are my soul's soul, my heart's core, beloved. I will pour at your feet all the sweets the world can give. I will fulfil your every wish, I will be faithful to you unto death.'
Esther's head drooped, and her breath went and came quickly as she murmured:
'And in return—'
'I would have,' Sir Jerom said softly—'I would have the sweet task of teaching you to love.'
'Why not complete the task before making me your wife?' she asked simply.
'My innocent one! do you not know why I want you now? Do you not see I am jealous? Darling, I must have you for my own; such love as mine cannot wait.'
Esther was silent.
Thoughts swift and sudden were passing rapidly through her mind.
She looked back upon the quiet uneventful life she had led at the old vicarage, with no companion to break the dull monotony.
True, she had a father and two sisters, but the Reverend Matthew Lisle seldom cared to leave his dingy study, and as to Ruth and Dorothy, they spent most of their time with the sick, or in working for the poor children of the parish.
Then she thought of the home Sir Jerom offered her, where she would be surrounded by every luxury, where she would be beloved!
Beloved! As she breathed the word over and over again in her heart her eyes glowed with a new triumphant light, and a soft rosy flush mantled her cheeks.
'Sweetheart,' Sir Jerom said, breaking in upon her reverie, 'I am impatient to know my fate. Are you content to pass your bright young life with me?'
Still there was no response.
'Esther! Esther!' he went on with passionate eagerness; 'for Heaven's sake tell me quickly; is my answer Yes or No?'
A moment's silence, then his voice again fell gently on her ear.
'Let it be yes, Esther.'
She raised her deep, dark eyes to his, and the clear, steadfast gaze sent a sudden thrill through his veins.
'As you will, Sir Jerom, as you will!' 'My life! my love!' and he clasped her tightly in his arms; at last you are mine—all mine!
He bent down and would have imprinted a kiss on her sweet lips, but she shrank tremblingly from his embrace.
'Nay,' he said, mistaking aversion for shyness. 'Look at me, darling, and promise to be my wife. As yet you have spoken no word that can bind you to me, or I should have enforced on you that kiss.'
Esther cast a swift, wavering glance into the face above her own.
Certainly Sir Jerom was not handsome, nor could he be termed good looking.
'He is old and ugly,' she thought to herself; 'but he is good, and he loves me.'
'Give me that lily you have in your dress, sweet one, and with it pledge your troth to me, that I may know I have not dreamed these blissful moments.'
Slowly she disentangled the flower from amongst the soft folds of lace, and as Sir Jerom outstretched his hand to receive it,

she murmured:
'With this flower I give my life into your keeping.'
The pretty voice ceased, the sweet face grew whiter than the waxen petals, and Esther, almost unconsciously, drew her hand back till the lily rested again on her breast.
'Must I take the will for the deed?' he asked lightly, too happy to note the despair in the girl's face. 'You are slow to part with that lily, and yet you know in return I will give you all that makes life worth the living.'
'I do not grudge you this poor, half-faded flower, but—Oh, Jerom,' she broke off, her eyes glowing with the intensity of her feelings, 'I know not if it be a sin to marry you, not loving you; I know not what my life will be when cast with yours, yet I will trust myself to you, not because I would be mistress of Westlea, but because you love me, and to me love is life.'
With a passionate movement she flung the lily into Sir Jerom's eager hand, and as his fingers closed round it he said earnestly:
'Darling, this flower will always remind me of you, it is so beautiful and—'
'So cold,' she interrupted absently.
A look of pain crossed the baronet's face, and his voice grew husky.
'Those were cruel words to fall from the lips of my promised wife.'
'Forgive me, Jerom. I did not think what I was saying.'
'It was a deep thrust to deal at random,' he replied with slow bitterness.
'Already I have displeased you, Jerom; let me take back my promise while there is yet time.'
'A lily once culled can never bloom on its parent stem, nor can a promise once given be withdrawn.'
'Then be it so. If in days to come you should regret having married me, remember how you refused to give back the freedom I begged.'
'The days you speak of will never come,' Sir Jerom said, ashamed of having given way to that outburst of temper. 'Esther, if I thought you could not be happy with me, I would leave you free and unfeathered. I feel sure you would learn to care for me in time, dear; you will not harden your heart against me.'
'No, I will try to love you.'
'Heaven bless you for those sweet words,' and he folded her closely in his arms.
She did not speak again or glance into the face of her lover until they reached the vicarage gate.
Then turning abruptly, she put out one small hand that gleamed like ivory in the moonlight. [He looked at her in surprise.
'I should like to speak to your father, Esther.'
'No, no, not now,' in low, hurried tones: 'I will tell him myself first.'
'Very well, darling,' Sir Jerom answered, pressing the cold white hands tenderly in his; 'perhaps it will be better so. Good-night, my little wife—good night.'
'At the word 'wife,' a shudder ran through Esther's veins, and she closed her eyes with a sickening dread, as she bent down to kiss her.
'My dearest! you are shivering. The night air has chilled you. Look at me, Esther, and tell me you are mine once more before we part.'
'Let me go now; tomorrow, Jerom—tomorrow I will say anything you wish.'
'I cannot leave you until you have given me some proof that your promise is sacred.'
'What shall I say—oh, what shall I say?' she cried, clasping her hands entreatingly.
'Say, "Dear Jerom, I am yours for ever and ever."
'Dear Jerom,' in a low, faltering voice, 'I am—'
The trembling tones died away; the fair face, for a moment upraised to his, drooped, while a shadow—the sable shadow of coming events settled darkly upon it, and the heart, so brave before, sank faint and heavy within her.
'Speak, my beloved,' murmured the baronet, smoothing her rippling hair with an encouraging touch.
She raised her lovely eyes to his with something of despair in their depths.
'I want your love, Jerom,' she whispered fervently; 'for the rest—have faith.'
'Is that all, Esther?'
'To-night—yes.'
She disengaged her hands from his, and in another moment had slipped from his embrace, gone like a gentle spirit in the hazy mists of eve.

CHAPTER II.

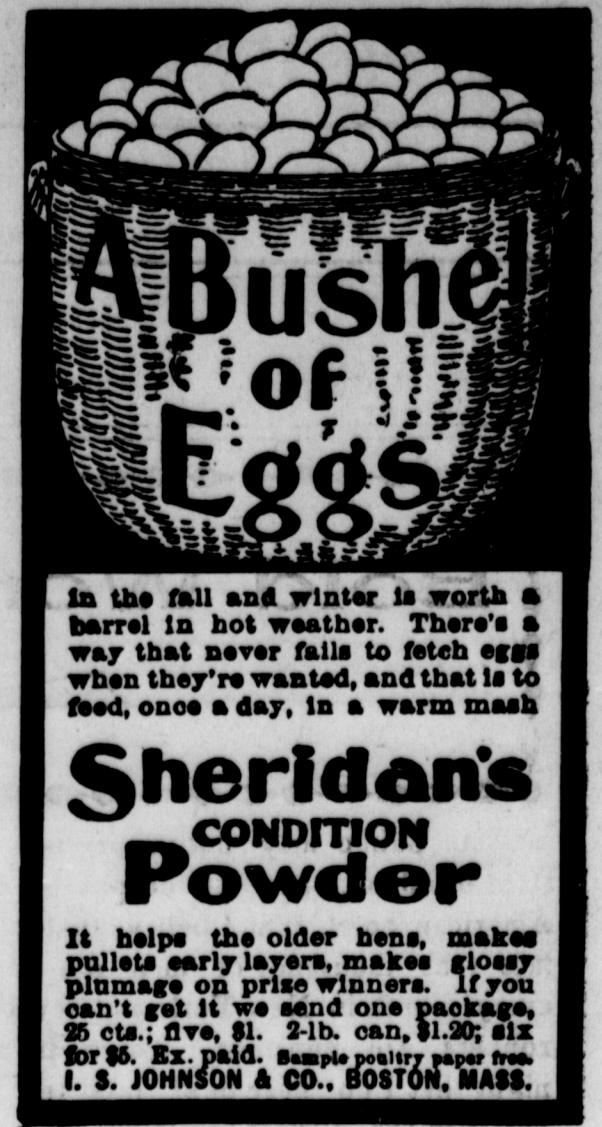
Gorgeous carriages drawn by glossy steeds were slowly winding up the Champs Elysees, forming one long line of light and beauty till they reached the Bois de Boulogne.
The smooth shining water blazed and sparkled like a huge diamond in the sunlight, while the soft splash of oars, mingled with the warbling melody of the birds, added a delicious charm to the scene.
Foremost of the carriages that stopped at this fairy-like spot was one less gaudy than the rest; the quiet footmen clad in their dark green livery, and the thoroughbred horses with their neat leather strapings, indicating the refined taste of an Englishman.
Notwithstanding the lack of show, in

which the French revel, a crowd of fashionably dressed people pressed forward, eager to catch a glimpse of Sir Jerom Farquhar's young wife.
Very beautiful did Esther look on that bright day. Her supple form, so full of undulating grace, was set off well by the white dress that swept to her feet in rich creamy folds.
Her great brown eyes were glowing with excitement, and her lips were curved in a half scornful smile as she scanned the confused mass of faces turned toward her.
'Let us go on the lake, Jerom and escape this crowd,' she whispered as he helped her alight; 'I dare say they are quizzing us horribly, and making mental notes on my dress. By-the-bye, do you like this old fashioned hat Madame de Bergeron persuaded me to buy?'
Sir Jerom glanced at the large feathered bonnet, with its fringe of costly pearls and clustering moss roses; then looked in to the fair face beaming beneath, and smiled proudly.
You could not have chosen anything more becoming,' he laughed.
By this time they had reached the lake, and as she stepped lightly into a blue painted boat, she looked around to admire the scene. Little guessing that all beauty must fade before her own.
'What a relief it is to find ourselves alone!' she exclaimed, smiling up in her husband's face.
'My darling you do not know how glad those words have made me,' he murmured as he skillfully plied the oars. 'Esther, I believe you are beginning to care for me at last.'
He bent his head nearer to hers as he spoke. Perhaps he expected she would say something to him, some word that would have made his heart lighter than it had ever been before; if so he was doomed to be disappointed.
Esther was silent.
'Tell me, mignonne,' he persisted; 'are you very happy with me in this modern Babylon?'
'Yes.'
Only one little word, yet Sir Jerom's face brightened wondrously.
'Esther have you learned to love me yet?'
Rather a strange question to fall from a husband's lips; but the sweet girl wife did not seem surprised, and after a momentary pause answered softly.
'I think so, Jerom.'
'I knew it must be so.'
For some time neither spoke again.
Esther had drawn the glove from her left hand, and, child-like, was hanging it over the side of the boat, letting the clear water ripple through her slender fingers.
'When would you like to go home?' Sir Jerom asked at length.
'Home?'
'To Westlea Abbey. I had a letter from Harvey this morning. He wants me to let him know what day we intend returning.'
A dim presentiment that life would not be so smooth for them when they were regularly settled at the old abbey; a dark foreboding of coming evil made Esther grow thoughtful.
She drew her hand slowly from the water, and as she commenced to dry it, her face grew suddenly white, and a low, startled cry broke from her lips.
'Jerom! my ring; my wedding-ring has gone.'
'Gone! How?'
For all answer she held out her hand, and his brow became clouded when he saw the golden hoop he had so lately placed on her finger no longer there.
'What have you done? Where is it?'
'There,' and she pointed in the deep shining water. 'Oh, Jerom, I am so sorry.'
'You should have been more careful, Esther. However, it cannot be helped; we will go at once and get another.'
'Another? ay, to satisfy the world! To me no other will have the same solemn meaning the one I have lost had. It was my wedding-ring.'
Although Sir Jerom did not say much it was evident he was displeased. A heavy frown settled on his brow and his manner was gloomy and sullen as, on returning to the shore, he placed his young wife in the carriage. He gave his orders to the footman in quick, imperative tones, and was about to take his seat beside her, when a hand was laid on his arm with a light detaining touch.
With an impatient gesture he turned his head, and as his glance fell on the tall, handsome woman standing by his side his face became livid and he reeled as though stunned by a heavy and unexpected blow.
'Gabrielle!' he exclaimed with a smothered oath, 'you here?'
'Yes, it is Gabrielle. You look ill, milord. Does the pleasure of this meeting overcome you?'
The words were spoken in good English, though with a pretty accent unmistakably French.
'It is strange,' she went on, clasping her other hand over the one already on his arm—'strange that we should meet again on this spot after—'
With a sudden movement Sir Jerom shook her hands from his sleeves.
His white, parched lips moved, but no sound escaped them.
'Absence has made you cold, milord. If you had not called me by my name I should think you had forgotten me.'
'Forgotten you! When will you let me forget you?' he cried with a slow deep anger. 'Bane of my existence, what need prompted you to cross my path, and for a second time cast your hated shadow over it? I hated you—I was fool enough to believe I had seen your hated face for the last time!'
The Frenchwoman darted him a keen look.
His bitter words had awakened the slumbering fire in her black eyes and they glittered ominously beneath her dark brows, but her lips still wore a smile as taking a step nearer to him she murmured:
'Ah, it was not thus you used to speak

of old—it was not thus you looked when those eyes, now turned so coldly from me, sought mine with seeming love and admiration—'
'Be silent, for Heaven's sake! Away! Do not touch me—do not follow me! You have chosen your own path, and now it is too late to turn back. Pass on, Gabrielle Geffroi; go your own way and leave me to go mine!'
'My way is your way. Years ago you courted my love, and when I gave it, flung it back as worthless. Milford, that love, like a poisonous weed, is deeply rooted in my heart. Since we parted it has been rankling, there, blighting every other affection and filling my life with bitterness and regret. Sir Jerom Farquhar, I have tried to hate you, I have tried to curse you, but I cannot, and now we have met at last, although I know you to be all that is mean and cowardly—although I scorn and despise you to the very utmost, I stoop to claim the fulfilment of the vow made when our love was young and guileless!'
A wild, bitter laugh escaped the baronet's lips.
'Too late—too late!'
As he uttered the mocking words he sprang into the carriage.
In an instant Gabrielle Geffroi had rushed forward, caught the handle of the door, and grasped it firmly in her hand.
For the first time she saw Esther, who, pale and trembling, was leaning helplessly back amongst the soft cushions.
'Who is she? Tell me quickly.'
'I know you will excuse me,' Sir Jerom said in cold, sarcastic tones. 'If I decline to introduce you to my wife, with great stress on the last two words.'
'Your wife! O, mon Dieu! mon Dieu!'
For a moment the Frenchwoman stood like one paralysed, then in a quick, passionate voice exclaimed:
'Milord, you are blacker, baser even than I thought. Not one heart have you deceived, but two—not one life have you married, but two. Twice have you played the false lover, and in twofold measure will the punishment you merit descend on your head. The wild oats you scattered with such unsparring hand have sunk deep in the earth, and although it rests with me, or my innocent rival to reap the bitter harvest—mark well my words, milord—the burthen will fall to you. Will you bow you down until you grovel with the worms you spurn with your heel?'
Before the last words had fallen from her lips the carriage dashed off and was lost to sight in a cloud of dust.
For a moment she gazed vaguely at the spot where it had been, looking almost like a beautiful pythoness in her anger, then, turning quickly away, mingled with the gay crowd.
After that disagreeable scene, neither Sir Jerom nor Lady Farquhar spoke again for some time.
At last the latter asked faintly:
'Jerom, who is that woman?'
'The haunting spirit of my boyhood's folly,' he replied with a dark scowl.
'You are evading my question, Jerom. What right had she to speak as she did?'
'None at all,' he muttered, without looking at her. 'You will do well not to speak to me of her. Any further question you may put to me I shall not answer. Already you have seen and heard too much.'
'I have seen and heard enough to give me the right to hear more. Jerom, what part did that woman play in your past life?'
'What was she to you?'
Sir Jerom bit his lip savagely and averted his head as he answered briefly:
'Nothing.'

CHAPTER III.

At breakfast the following morning scarcely a word passed between them, and Esther was glad when her husband pushed his chair from the table and rose.
What would you like to do, my dear?' he asked, slowly examining his watch.
It was the first time he had ever addressed her by that term of cold endearment, and the words grated on her ear with a harsh unpleasant sound.
She would have preferred remaining at home; but thinking to please him, she answered:
'I should like to go to the Louvre, Jerom.'
'I thought you were tired of straining your eyes to look at pictures you have seen so often,' he remarked with a yawn. 'Did you not tell me so the other day?'
'Yes, but I want to go this morning,' impudently. 'You must take me there, Jerom.'
'Very well, my lady. At present your will is law. Be careful. Perhaps the time will come when I shall enforce mine.'
'Will you ever compel me to act contrary to my inclinations, Jerom? I think not.'
'The marriage law intimates a wife's will should be null or guided only by her husband's,' he said coldly.
She darted him a quick, scornful look that showed him how bitterly she resented his words.
'I am afraid you will never make me submissive and docile,' she said impulsively; 'nor will you make my will yield to yours.'
She threw her head back defiantly as she spoke, and with swift graceful steps hastened from the room; but when, a few minutes later, she re-entered, equipped for walking, the proud defiant look had faded into one of self reproach.
'Is your ladyship ready?' the baronet asked, with ill-concealed impatience.
'Quite. I am only waiting for you.'
'Come, then.'
He took up his hat and moved towards the door, but with a quiet movement Esther closed it, and stood with her back against the oak panels.
'What strange freak is this?' he exclaimed almost roughly. 'Are you mad, or is this child's play?'
Esther shivered.
She could not accustom herself to the sudden change in his manner. Yesterday he had been all love and tenderness; now he was icily sarcastic, or entirely ignored



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her presence.
'Do not look so angry, Jerom. Before we go out I must speak to you; I must tell you I am sorry for having spoken as I did just now.'
Pale and penitent she stood before him her fair hands loosely clasped, her golden head slightly bent down, no sign, save a quivering of the drooped lids, betokening the struggle those softly whispered words had cost her proud young heart.
'How much longer is this farce to last?' questioned Sir Jerom in chilling tones.
'Farce? Why are you so cruelly bitter—you who made me believe you loved me?'
'I did love you—madly loved you.'
'Did love me! Then it is past—you have ceased to care for me?'
'I have not said so.'
'Ay, but you have shown it in your every word, your every look, since you met the woman you called Gabrielle Jerom, what control has she over your affections that she could in a few short minutes change your love for me to cold indifference?'
Sir Jerom gnawed his moustache savagely.
'For the second time, Esther, I forbid you to mention that name,' he said with slow, distinct force. 'Yesterday I told you I would answer no question concerning my past life, but this much I will tell you that you may be satisfied: Gabrielle Geffroi is nothing to me, neither; has she any influence over the emotions of my heart.'
'Nay,' she answered impulsively, 'nothing but the whole truth can give me satisfaction, Jerom. I know you are hiding some dark, awful secret from me. Oh, for pity's sake, tell me what there is between you and that vengeful woman we met by the lake of the Bois?'
'Once more I tell you, nothing.'
'If I could believe that!' Esther cried, clasping her hands in her eagerness. 'Are you sure you are not deceiving me?'
For a moment he watched her in silence. Something in those low, pleading accents had touched a tender chord in his heart; the cold expression on his countenance gradually melted into a look of passionate longing, and taking a step forward he told her tightly to him.
'For God's sake be careful how far you try me!' he exclaimed hoarsely. 'I have never deceived you in one thing, Esther. I love you, yet with a love that could turn to bitterest hatred. Why do you shiver?' he asked, as he felt the slight form tremble in his embrace, 'you who do not value my love—'
'You forget, Jerom,' she interrupted gently, 'I am your wife.'
'And does a wife care for the affection of her husband even when she does not love him?' he inquired bitterly.
There was a short pause.
Then the answer came, clear and distinct:
'Even if she does not love him.'
At the end of one of the long galleries of the Louvre, two young men were critically examining a group of antique statues, and commenting on every finely chiselled line in a manner that betokened them to be pilgrims, not strangers to the art; pilgrims climbing the steep mountain of Fame side by side, eager to reach the go den summit that was to crown their names with glory. Yet how widely different—how far apart were those two! the one laboring for wealth with which to buy the world's pleasures; the other, seeking enjoyment in the work itself, for all the love and energy of Kenard Gwydir's life was in his art, and now as he studied the old masterpieces before him, he was deaf to everything passing around, and Felix Gay spoke twice without winning any response.
'I say, old fellow,' cried the latter, bringing his hand down rather heavily on his friend's shoulder, 'I quite forgot about that plaster. I must go up to Moir, and make him send it down at once. Shan't be long.'
Left to himself, Gwydir resumed his study of the grand old carvings uninterrupted and unrestrained by the presence of another.
Suddenly he felt, rather than heard or saw—felt that he was watched, and was no longer alone.
With a start he turned his handsome head, and stood with his tall, well knit

CONTINUED ON PAGE FIFTEEN.

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