

Taken for Granted.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS—PART I.

A flush rose to his face. "Good heavens! You here, Miss Fortescue?" he exclaimed, as he went hastily towards her.

"That was Mrs. Rothsay, was it not?" Honour was almost startled to hear herself uttering these words. They seemed to fall from her lips without any volition of her own.

Clive stared at her for a moment. "You have heard of her, then?" he said, in a low, constrained voice. "You are acquainted with our miserable story?"

"Yes." Honour did not doubt that he referred to the fact of his being the husband of a mad wife.

"But—how—?" He broke off suddenly. "It does not matter," he muttered under his breath.

"I heard of it quite by accident, Mr. Rothsay," Honour said: she divined what his unspoken words would have been. "I hope you do not think I would wilfully pry into your secrets."

"Indeed I do not, Miss Fortescue." He hesitated a moment. Then he said: "May I ask you not to mention what you have just witnessed? It is not that I wish to make a secret of my—of Mrs. Rothsay's existence; indeed, the fact of its having come to your knowledge proves that I could not do so; but, as you may suppose, we do not wish the matter to be talked about more than necessary; and besides that, I should like to keep this outbreak of hers from my mother and Githa, as it would make them very nervous and uneasy."

"You may rest assured that no one will hear of it from me, Mr. Rothsay. But has she been like this long?"

"For some years; though, when I first knew her, she was apparently as sane as you or I; she had been a wife some months before she showed symptoms of the dreadful disease we then learnt was hereditary in her father's family. For generations insanity had shown itself in some of its members; he himself committed suicide, and two of his brothers are now in an asylum—hopeless homicidal maniacs."

"But how cruel—how wicked of her friends to conceal such a thing!" exclaimed Honour indignantly.

"It was indeed, and the consequences have been terrible," answered Clive, with a deep sigh. "I must, however, in justice, tell you that Valerie was ignorant of the awful doom which was probably hanging over her, and her mother was firmly convinced that she would escape it altogether. She died a few weeks after her daughter's marriage, and so she never knew the evil her duplicity had wrought. The first symptom Valerie exhibited of the disease was the murder of her child—"

"Oh, Mr. Rothsay! Do you actually mean that she killed her own child?" interrupted Honour in horrified accents.

"She did, indeed. She took advantage of the nurse's absence, and strangled the poor little thing. After that we could not keep her with us, and she was taken to an asylum."

"But I suppose she got better before you took her away?"

Clive shook his head. "She has never been better, and there is no hope that she ever will be," he said sadly. "But after our reverses, I found it impossible to keep up such heavy payments as were required at the establishment where she had been placed; and then, as neither my mother nor I could bear the idea of sending her to an interior one, where, perhaps, she might not have been well treated, we decided to engage a nurse, and bring her here with us."

"But is it not rather dangerous to have her here, Mr. Rothsay?"

"We take every precaution. The nurse is thoroughly experienced, and it is seldom that Valerie has these violent attacks without warning; besides, I am always careful to be within call."

"I suppose you have more influence over her than anyone else?" observed Honour.

"I! Clive looked distinctly surprised. "I have none—except that of superior strength. In fact, she hates me," he said. "I believe she never liked me in her heart, and now the sight of me rouses her to fury. I always keep away from her as much as possible."

"It she disliked you, why did she marry you?" was the question that rose to Honour's lips.

But she restrained it. She thought she understood—Clive had loved Valerie, but she had only married him for his money.

"It is very sad—very terrible for both of you," she said; though, in her heart, she thought that Clive only was deserving of pity.

Then she went indoors to see Githa. Her visit was, however, a brief one, for she found it impossible to keep up conversation on indifferent subjects while her thoughts were all running on one which she must conceal from everybody.

Poor Honour! She had given her heart to Clive Rothsay.

His image was indelibly impressed in the inmost recesses of her soul, and he was a married man!

She was angry and ashamed—the more so because she could find no shadow of excuse for having permitted her heart to go out of her own keeping.

He had never said one word which the

most ordinary friendship would not warrant. But she would conquer this foolish passion.

It was degrading. She would tear it from her heart, and, for the future, see as little as possible of Clive Rothsay.

She adhered to this resolution, and, after that day, avoided him as much as she could without attracting general attention.

Clive, who loved her as deeply as she loved him, though he would never have thought of telling her of it, was much pained by the change in her manner towards him.

"She has guessed my folly, and is taking this method to show her resentment," he thought bitterly. "For the future, I must remember that she is Miss Fortescue, of Braydon Hall, while I am only Clive Rothsay, the farmer."

"Is Rothsay in any trouble, or is he ill?" Roy Fortescue asked his sister, one afternoon, about a later, as he came in from a visit to the farm.

"Neither, that I am aware of; but I have not seen him for some time—nearly a week; I think; what makes you suppose that anything is the matter with him?"

Honour spoke quietly enough, but her heart was throbbing painfully. "Anyone can see that there is. I never saw a man alter as he has done lately—he does not seem to have any life in him; I told him so just now, but he denied that there was anything wrong, and laughed it off. He seems to me as if he had something on his mind."

"Neither Mrs. Rothsay nor Githa has said anything to me about him," Honour answered.

In her own mind she had little doubt that Clive was worried about his wife, but as Roy knew nothing of Valerie, she could not suggest that explanation.

"Are you going up to town, as you talked of doing, Roy?" she asked, a minute or two afterwards.

"Oh, yes; I don't want to miss Vernon—and he sails tomorrow. I shall get a bed at Sinclair's, and return some time in the afternoon—most likely by the six-thirty; at any rate, Foster had better meet that."

"And what train are you going up by?" "The four fifteen," Roy replied. "And, by Jove! I have none too much time," he added, as he looked at his watch. "Just ring the bell and tell them to bring the dogcart round at once, will you, dear?"

CHAPTER VI.

"Oh, miss, such an awful thing has happened at the farm! Mrs. Rothsay has stabbed Mr. Rothsay and killed herself!" Honour's maid told her, when she took up her mistress's hot water the next morning.

Honour sprang up with an exclamation of horror.

"Jenner, are you sure it is true?" she asked hoarsely.

"Quite certain, miss. The groom had it from the man who goes round with the milk from the farm. They say she's been mad for a long time, but it's been kept quiet. I'm sure no one would ever have thought it, such a nice lady as she has always seemed."

"Is—Mr. Rothsay much injured?"

"Try as she would, Honour could not keep her voice quite steady. "The doctor don't give much hope of him," Jenner said. "Whatever poor Miss Githa and those dear little children will do all alone, I can't think, it does seem awful—their own mother too!"

Honour, of course, knew that it must be Clive's mad wife who had done this deed, but she did not feel disposed to enlighten the maid just then.

If what she had heard were true, every one would know all there was to know about the wretched maniac soon.

"I will go to the farm; perhaps I can be of help," she said. "Get me a cup of cocoa, Jenner; I will drink it while I am dressing."

As the maid left the room, Honour threw herself on her knees and prayed with all her heart that Clive's life might be spared.

An unnatural stillness seemed brooding over the farm when she reached it.

The men in the yard were doing their work in silence, instead of whistling and singing over it as usual; and even the animals appeared to be less noisy than ordinarily.

"Yes, miss, it's quite true," the girl who opened the door said in answer to Honour's enquiry. "Master's still alive, but the doctor don't seem to think as he'll get over it."

"And Mrs. Rothsay?"

"The missus is as well as can be expected after the shock as she's had, but the other one's dead; pity she wasn't before she did all this mischief. But won't you please to come in, miss? The missus is in master's room, but it'll do Miss Githa good to see someone, poor young lady."

Honour went upstairs at once. Githa, who was standing near the window, turned round immediately she entered.

doctor says he is so weak from loss of blood that there is only the barest chance for him. He must keep perfectly quiet; but how can he, with all this to worry him? That wretched woman was my sister-in-law. I may tell you that now, for everyone must know it soon. She has been mad for years."

"I have known all about her for some time," Honour told her. "I learned in quite accidentally. Your brother asked me not to mention that I had seen her; otherwise I should have told you."

"Yes, it is like him to keep all unpleasantness to himself. I suppose she had escaped then, as she did now. No one can imagine how she contrived to open her door this morning, but she did it somehow; and then she took a knife from the kitchen, and hid in the passage till Clive came along. She must have known that he usually went out at that little side door. She ought never to have been in the house at all. I have always felt she would do mischief of some kind, and I have told Clive so, but he has always said I was unnecessarily nervous."

"It is indeed a pity that she was ever brought to live here, though it was only natural that your brother should wish to do what would be most for her comfort. How does your mother bear up under this trouble, dear?"

"Bravely, as she always does. She has not left him since it happened, except for a moment to go to the children, who are nearly ill with grief."

"Poor darlings!" said Honour compassionately. "Would it not be better for them to be away, Githa? I could take them back with me if your mother would consent; I would take good care of them."

"I know you would, dear; but I don't think they ought to be away, in case Clive—"

Githa stopped and choked down a sob. "He might ask to see them," she concluded.

Honour understood quite well that she was thinking of the possibility of his wishing to bid them farewell ere he drew his last breath.

"Honour pray that he may be spared to us," Githa went on excitedly. "Pray as you never prayed before. Your prayers should aid him, for you love him, don't you, dear?"

This question, so utterly unexpected, brought the blood in a hot crimson tide to Honour's pale face.

"—he is one of my most valued friends, and—"

She stopped in confusion, and Githa broke in—

"I don't mean that! I mean you love him—not as a friend, but as a woman loves the man who is all in all to her. It is so, is it not?"

"Hush, hush, dear! you must not say such a thing," cried Honour painfully. "You do not understand."

"But I do understand only too well," persisted Githa. "You think, perhaps, because I am only a useless cripple, that I cannot know what love is; but I do know, to my great sorrow, and that is why I can read your heart so easily."

Honour listened to these impassioned words with amazement, half doubting if the speaker could know what she was saying. Who could there be for her to love like that?

Githa laughed bitterly. "You deem it impossible," she said; "but do you think my heart must necessarily be maimed and useless because my body is so? Better for me, perhaps, if it had been! But listen, and I will tell you who I love; only, you must promise never to reveal my secret to anyone."

Honour gave the required promise, and then Githa went on in a low voice—

"I love your brother. Of course, I know it is pure madness on my part, since no man could ever think of me as a wife; but I love him all the same. The mere touch of his hand or the sound of his voice thrills me to the heart. He is dearer to me than Clive himself. I never thought such love could be possible."

Honour threw her arms round the girl and kissed her pitifully.

"Oh, Githa, my darling, I am so grieved! I am sure Roy—"

"Does not dream that I am such a fool," broke in the girl in tones of passionate self-contempt. "I know I am nothing to him, but I have told you my secret, that you may know that love means more to me than a mere word. And now you will not refuse to own that you love Clive?"

No, I will no longer attempt to deceive you. But, Githa, darling, you must never tell anyone—indeed, we had better not refer to it again ourselves, for it is shameful of me to think of him like that, with the barrier there is between us—"

"Barrier?" Githa repeated the word in astonishment.

"Well, perhaps there is none now, but—"

Honour broke off suddenly, and then added entreatingly: "Don't let us talk of it any more dear; we each have our secret, and we must keep it, no matter how it hurts our hearts."

"Mother, I have been thinking over what we were talking of last night," Clive said in the evening of the day of the funeral of the woman who had so nearly been his murderer. "I think information of Valerie's death should be sent at once. But only give such particulars as are absolutely necessary, and don't mention anything about me now—it will be hard enough without that."

"But, my dear boy, how is a letter to be sent?" asked Mrs. Rothsay, with a troubled look. "It would never do to post it here."

"No, but there is no reason it should not be posted at Westenhoe as usual—Margaret could take it."

"But I should not like her to be away from the house just now, objected Mrs. Rothsay. "I can do so little for my myself, and neither Ellen nor Jane is anything of a nurse."

"I shall not be likely to want anything for the short time she will be gone; the journey to Westenhoe and back would be a matter of three hours at the most," urged the invalid, in a weak, but insistent voice.

Mrs. Rothsay, however, still seemed doubtful.

"Would it not be wiser to wait till you are better?" she said.

"No; perhaps I shall never be better. I scarcely desire it, I think. I feel as if it would be a good thing to be out of it all." Clive sighed wearily as he spoke.

His step-mother looked at him inquiringly.

"Are you worrying about Valerie?" she asked.

"No; I was not thinking specially of her. But, please, don't ask me any more. I cannot tell you, and you could not help me if I did. The only thing you can do for me is to send that letter."

Mrs. Rothsay fetched some writing materials and began the letter about which he was so anxious.

"Will that do, dear?" she asked a little later, when she had read aloud what she had written.

"Yes; I do not think anything better could be said. Let Margaret go at once."

A look of relief came into his eyes as Mrs. Rothsay left the room to comply with his wishes.

Clive Rothsay did not die, and about three weeks later, when he was just able to leave his room, Honour came to the farm to say good bye before starting for the south of France, whither Roy insisted on taking her for a change.

She had grown so pale and thin during the last few weeks, that he had become quite anxious about her.

If Honour would have permitted it he would have summoned the family doctor, but she declared that nothing ailed her.

She could not tell him the truth—that she loved Clive Rothsay, a man who had never treated her otherwise than as a friend, and whose wife was scarcely cold in the grave, and that it was anxiety on his account which had robbed her cheeks of their bloom.

CHAPTER VII.

They did not return to Braydon Hall till the summer was nearly over, and then, almost in the first hour of their arrival, Honour started to go to the farm.

Mrs. Rothsay's last letter had told her that Githa had been ailing, and she wanted to see her, she told Roy; that she was even more anxious to see Clive she scarcely realized herself.

She went in at the garden entrance, and when she got within sight of the house, she was surprised to find the whole family on the lawn.

She was still more surprised to see that they had a stranger with them—a tall, dark, handsome man, evidently an invalid, as he was reclining on a couch, and looked terribly worn and emaciated.

He closely resembled Clive, but he appeared to be many years older.

Honour wondered who he could be, as she had always understood that they had no relatives.

She was annoyed with herself for having come upon them unannounced; the more so that they seemed to be embarrassed.

The children rushed at her and almost overwhelmed her with the boisterousness of their greeting, and Mrs. Rothsay and Githa welcomed her warmly, in spite of their evident embarrassment.

Clive was the last to come forward.

"Will you allow me to introduce my brother to you, Miss Fortescue?" he said, as he shook hands. Then, to Honour's astonishment, he added, almost in the same breath, and in an undertone—"For Heaven's sake be merciful!"

She asked inquiringly at him.

She could, however, read nothing in his face, save a mixture of entreaty and apprehension, and she offered her hand to the stranger, who bewildered her still more by the hesitating manner in which he took it—almost as if he were afraid, she thought.

She felt there was some mystery in all this, and wished she could find some excuse to withdraw.

"I did not know that you had returned, my dear," Mrs. Rothsay said quickly, evidently to draw Honour's attention away from him.

"We only arrived this morning. We came rather sooner than we had intended, because Roy wished to travel with a friend to Boulogne," Honour replied.

The conversation now became general, or, at least, partly so, for the stranger took no share in it.

"Isn't it funny that we should have another big brother, Honour?" Truda asked presently. "He says he has never seen Eric and me before, and that Githa was a little girl when he knew her. It's nice to have him, though; I like big brothers. But we don't know where he comes from. Do you?"

"Mrs. Rothsay saved Honour from having to reply to this embarrassing question, by telling the child she must not be such a chatterbox."

"But I'm not a chatterbox, mamma; I only like to talk," Truda answered quaintly.

"So it seems, but it is a liking you cannot indulge now; Miss Fortescue is not to be bothered," Clive said, in sterner accents than he had ever before used to the children.

After this, Truda was silent, till Honour, who could not bear to see the cloud on her face, asked her how her rabbits were getting on.

"Oh, beautifully! Eric's white doe has got some young ones. Won't you come and see them?"

Honour accepted the invitation gladly. One corner of the garden had been given up to the children and their pets, and thither they now conducted her.

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"I want to apologize to you for what you must have thought very strange conduct on my part, Miss Fortescue," he said gravely, as soon as the children were gone.

"But, in truth, I scarcely knew what to do. I was anxious to spare my unhappy brother, and—and I feared you might resent being introduced to him."

"Why should I?" Honour's tone was one of genuine surprise.

"Many, considering his past history, would do so."

"But I know nothing of his history, Mr. Rothsay. How could I, when I did not even know you had a brother?"

"You did not know I had a brother?" Clive looked as if he could hardly believe he had heard aright. "I understood you to say, at the time you saw Valerie, that you were acquainted with our secret."

"I meant that I had heard of her," explained Honour.

"I wish to Heaven I had known that then I—"

Clive stopped, as if doubting what he should say.

"Never mind, Mr. Rothsay," Honour put in kindly. "Don't tell me anything more, if you had rather not."

"But I should much prefer you knowing everything. Indeed, under the circumstances, I think it is right you should."

Clive paused a moment, then he said abruptly—

"How old do you take Rolf to be, Miss Fortescue?"

"I should think he was about fifty."

Clive laughed sadly.

"And he is only thirty-three, just three years my senior," he said. "It is trouble and sorrow that have aged him."

He paused again.

"What will you say if I tell you that he is a convict, Miss Fortescue?" he asked a moment after, with a sharp drawing of the breath, as if it gave him physical pain to put the question.

"A convict?" Honour could scarcely credit her ears.

"It is only too true. Yet, when you have heard all, Miss Fortescue, I think—I hope—you will pity rather than blame him. Poor Rolf! Being the eldest son, he had been allowed to have his own way a good deal; in fact, if he had not been naturally very good tempered and unselfish he would have been utterly spoiled. As it was, it quite unfitted him to bear trouble, and when his great sorrow came it almost drove him mad."

"He threw himself into all sorts of excesses, and was frequently absent from home for weeks at a time. At last, one day we were horrified to hear that he had been arrested for forgery! We thought at first that it was but a mistake, which would soon be cleared up, as we knew he had no motive for such a crime. But the waiter at the club swore that he had seen him sign the prosecutor's name, and after that it was only we, who knew he would not tell a lie, who believed him when he said he knew nothing about it."

"Do you believe in hypnotism, Miss Fortescue? I do, for it was by its devilish aid that my brother was ruined. The man who would have benefited by that bill if it had been unquestioned, was known to have boasted that he had the power of compelling anyone to do his will, and there was no doubt that he had exercised that power on Rolf, whose ability to imitate any handwriting was well known to his friends."

"But hypnotism was not known and accepted then as it is now, and when it was urged as a defence at his trial, it only provoked laughter, and Rolf was sentenced to ten years' penal servitude."

"His term has now expired, and he has come back to us once more. I will, however, arrange, for the future that you shall not be annoyed by meeting him."

"You must have a very poor opinion of me if you think I should feel annoyance, Mr. Rothsay," Honour answered indignantly. "I think your brother deserves nothing but pity."

She never for an instant thought of questioning Clive's judgment.

He believed in his brother's innocence, and nothing would have induced her to entertain the possibility of Rolf being guilty.

CHAPTER VIII.

As the summer faded, it became only too plain that Githa was fading too.

Each day her face seemed to take a more spiritual expression, and she cared less about going out.

She was not in any particular pain, she always said in answer to the loving inquiries of those about her; she was only tired.

Honour was her frequent visitor; indeed, there was scarcely a day when she did not spend several hours with her.

She was sitting with her one afternoon while she slept, when Rolf came in.

He was much stronger now, and though his deeply-lined face and grey hair told of past suffering, he appeared quite a different man.

CONTINUED ON PAGE FIFTEEN.

CANCER