

BETRAYED;

A DARK MARRIAGE MORN.

A Romance of Love, Intrigue and Crime.

BY MRS. ALICE P. CARRISTON.

CHAPTER XXII.—(Continued.)

He admired her like a rare plant, a beautiful object, an exquisite work, in which nature had combined physical and moral grace with perfect proportion and harmony. His department as slave near her was not long a performance. Our fair readers have, doubtless, remarked an odd fact, which is, that where a reciprocal sentiment of two feeble human beings has reached a certain point of maturity, chance never fails to furnish a fatal occasion which betrays the secret of the two hearts, and suddenly latrophes the thunderbolt which has been gradually gathering in the clouds.

This is the crisis of all love. This occasion presented itself to Clara Denton and Warren Leland in the form of an unopposed incident, with which the rag-picker and his little grandchildren were intimately connected.

It was the end of the month. Leland had gone out after dinner to take a ride in the neighborhood. Night had already fallen, clear and cool, but as he could not see Mrs. Denton that evening, he began to think only of being near her, and felt that unwillingness to work common to lovers, striving to kill time, which hung heavy on his hands.

He hoped also that violent exercise might calm his spirit, which had never been more profoundly agitated. Still young and unpracticed in his pitiless system, he was troubled at the thought of a victim so pure as Clara Denton. To trample on the life, the repose, and the heart of such a woman, as the horse tramples on the grass of the road, with a little care or pity, was hard for a novice.

As strange as it may appear, the idea of marrying her had occurred to him. Then he said to himself that this weakness was in direct contradiction to his principles, and that would cause him to lose forever the mastery over himself, and throw him back into the nothingness of his past life. Yet, with the corrupt inspirations of his depraved soul, he foresaw that the moment he touched her hands with the lips of a lover, a new sentiment would spring up in her soul, and she would be a bad reputation.

As he abandoned himself to these passionate imaginings, the recollection of Amy Brownell came back suddenly to his memory.

He grew pale in the darkness. At this moment he was passing by the edge of a piece of woods a portion of which had been cleared.

It was not chance alone that had directed him to this point. Clara Denton loved this spot and had frequently taken him there, and on the preceding evening, accompanied by her daughter and Mildred Lester, had visited it with him. The site was a peculiar one. Although not far from houses, the woods were very wild, as though a thousand miles distant from any other place.

You would have said it was a virgin forest, untouched by the ax of the pioneer. Enormous stumps without bark, trunks of gigantic trees, covered pell-mell the declivity of the hill, and barricaded here and there, in a picturesque manner, the current of the brook which was in the valley.

A little higher up the dense wood of tufted trees contributed to diffuse that religious light half over the rocks, the brushwood, and the fertile soil, and on the limpid water, which is the charm and horror of old, neglected, and deserted places.

In this solitude, and on quite a space of cleared ground, rose a poor cottage. This was Jennie's home, and here her children and her father lived with her.

The old rag-picker interested Clara Denton greatly, probably because, like Leland, he had a bad reputation. She loved the children, too, who, though dirty, were beautiful as angels, and she pitied their mother.

The little ones had been quite ill. Clara had helped to nurse them, and apparently they had recovered; indeed, only the evening before, Leland and the party with him had met them wandering in the woods, careless and happy as children ought to be.

Leland slowly walked his horse over the rocky and winding path on the slope of the hillside, and when he had reached when the ghost of Amy Brownell had, as it were, risen before him, and he believed he could almost hear her cry.

All at once this illusion gave place to a strange reality. The voice of a woman plainly called him by name, in accents of distress:

"Mr. Leland, Mr. Leland!"

Stopping his horse on the instant, he felt an icy shudder pass through his frame.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT THE RAG-PICKERS' COTTAGE.

The same voice rose higher, and called him again.

He recognized it as the voice of Clara Denton.

Looking around him in the obscure light with a rapid glance, he saw a light shining through the foliage in the direction of Jennie's cottage.

The doctor approached Warren quickly. "Mr. Leland," said he, "what can this be? I believe it to be poisoning, but can detect no definite symptoms; otherwise, the mother should know—but she knows nothing! A sunstroke, perhaps; but as both were struck at the same time—and then at this season—ah, my dear sir, your profession is very useless sometimes."

"Isn't it a relapse?"

"No, not nothing at all like the recent illness."

Leland made further and rapid inquiries. They had sought the doctor, who was dining with Mr. Metcalf's family an hour before. He had hastened, and found the children in a state of fearful congestion. It appeared they had fallen into this state when first attacked, and became delirious.

Leland conceived an idea. He asked to see the clothes the children had worn during the day.

The mother gave them to him. The doctor touched his forehead, and turned over with a feverish hand the rough waistcoats, the knee-breeches, searched the pockets, and found dozens of a small fruit like cherries, half crushed.

"A species of deadly nightshade!" he exclaimed. "That idea struck me several times, but how could I be sure? You cannot find it within sixty miles of here, except in the vicinity of this cursed spot—that I am sure of."

"Do you think there is yet time?" asked Leland, in a low voice. "The children seem to me to be very ill."

"Lost, I am afraid; but everything depends on the time which has passed, the quantity they have taken, and the remedies at our disposal."

The good physician consulted quickly with Clara, who found that she had not in her country pharmacy the necessary remedies, or counter-irritants, which the urgency of the case demanded.

He was obliged to content himself with the essence of coffee, which Jennie prepared in haste, and to send to New Milford for the other things needed.

"To New Milford!" exclaimed Clara. "Good heavens! it is more than ten miles—it is night, and we shall have to wait probably three or four hours!"

Leland heard this.

"Doctor, write your prescription," he said; "my horse is at the door, and with him I can do the twenty miles in an hour; in one hour I promise to be here again."

"Oh, thanks!" exclaimed Clara. He took the prescription which the doctor had traced on a leaf of his pad, mounted his horse and departed.

The highway was, fortunately, not far distant.

When he reached it he put spurs to his horse, and rode like the phantom horseman.

It was 9 o'clock when Clara Denton witnessed his departure; it was a few moments after 10 when she heard the tramp of his horse at the foot of the hill, and ran to the door of the cottage to greet him.

The condition of the two children seemed to have grown worse in the interval, but the doctor had great hopes in the remedies which Leland was to bring.

She waited with impatience, and received him like the dawn of the last hope.

She contented herself with pressing his hand, when, breathless he descended from his horse. But, womanlike, she threw herself on the animal, who was covered with foam, and steaming like a stove.

"Poor Sultan," she said, embracing him in her two arms—"dear Sultan, good Sultan! You are half dead, are you not? But I love you well. Go in quickly, Mr. Leland. I will attend to Sultan."

And while the young man entered the cottage she called Sultan to the farm hand, with orders to take him to the stable, and a thousand minute directions to take good care of him after his noble conduct.

The doctor had to obtain the aid of Leland to pass the new medicine through the clenched teeth of the unfortunate children. While both were engaged in this work, Clara was sitting on a stool with her head resting against the wall.

The doctor suddenly raised his eyes and fixed them on her.

"By my dear Mrs. Denton," he said, "you are ill. You have had too much excitement, and the air in this poor place is very bad. You must go home."

"I really do not feel very well," she murmured.

"You must go at once. We shall send you the nurse. Your father's hired man will take you home."

He prepared the fuel, and lighted it with a match. When the flame began to flicker on the rustic hearth, Clara trembled with joy and held out both hands to the blaze.

"Heavens! how nice it is!" she said, "and then this is amusing; one would say we had been shipwrecked. Now, Mr. Leland, if you would be perfect, go and see what the doctor says."

He ran to the cottage, and quickly returned.

"What?" she exclaimed. "A great deal of hope."

"Oh! how glad I am!" She pressed his hand.

"Sit down there," she said. He sat down on a rock near her, and replied to her eager questions. He repeated in detail his conversation with the doctor. She listened at first with interest, but little by little, wrapping her head in her veil, and resting it on the bough intruded behind her, she seemed to be unconsciously resting from fatigue.

"You are likely to fall asleep there," he said, laughing.

"Quite so," she murmured—smiled, and went to sleep.

Her sleep resembled death, it was so profound, and so calm was the beating of her heart, so regular her breathing.

Leland knelt down again by the hearth, to listen breathlessly and to gaze upon her.

From time to time he seemed to meditate, and the solitude was only disturbed by the rustling of the leaves.

His eyes followed the flickering of the flame, sometimes resting on the white rock, sometimes on the woods, sometimes on the arches of the high trees, as though he wished to fix in his memory all the images of peace, truth, virtue, and happiness passed into that brain full of storm, and chased away phantoms of the sophistries he cherished? He himself knew, but never told.

The brisk crackling of the wood awakened her. She opened her eyes in surprise, and as she saw the young man kneeling before her, addressed him.

"How are they now, Mr. Leland?" He did not know how to tell her that for the last hour he had but one thought, and that was of her.

"The doctor appeared suddenly before them."

"They are saved, Mrs. Denton," he said, abruptly; "come and see for yourself, and then return home, or we shall have to cure you to-morrow. You are very imprudent to have remained in these damp woods, and it was foolish of Mr. Leland to let you do so."

She took the doctor's arm and re-entered the cottage. The two children, now roused from the dangerous torpor, but who seemed still terrified by the threatened death, raised their little heads. She made a sign to keep quiet, and leaning over their pillow, kissed them.

"To-morrow, my darlings," she said. But the mother, half laughing, half crying, followed Clara step by step, speaking to her, and kissing her hand.

"With women—and it is to their honor—this metamorphosis can be durable, but it is rarely so with men."

Once transported to this stormy sky, women frankly accept their proper home, and the vicinity of the thunder does not disturb them.

Passion is their element—they feel at home there. There are few women worthy of the name who are not ready to put in action all the words which passion has caused to bubble up from their lips.

If they speak of flight, they are ready for exile, if they talk of dying, they are ready for death. Men are far less consistent in their ideas.

It was not until late the next morning that Leland regretted his outbreak of sincerity; for, during the remainder of the night, he had been so excited, so agitated and shaken by the passage of the god, sunk into a confused and feverish reverie, he was incapable of reflection.

But when, on awakening, he surveyed the situation calmly and by the plain light of day, and thought over the preceding evening and its events, he did not fail to recognize the fact that he had been cruelly duped by his own nervous system.

To love Clara Denton was perfectly proper, and he loved her still—for she was a person to be loved and desired; but to elevate that love or any other, as the master of his life, instead of its plaything, was one of those weaknesses interdicted by his system more than any other.

In fact, he felt he had spoken and acted like a schoolboy on a holiday. He had uttered words, made promises, and taken engagements on himself which he could not demand of him. No conduct could have been more ridiculous.

Happily nothing was lost. He had yet time to give his love that subordinate place which this sort of phantasy should occupy in the life of man.

He had been imprudent, but this very imprudence might finally prove of service to him. All that remained of this scene was a declaration—graciously made, spontaneous, natural—which subjected Clara Denton to the magnetic charm of a mystic idolatry which pleased her sex, and to that manly violence which could not dispense her.

He had, therefore, nothing to regret, although he certainly would have preferred, taking the point of view from his principles, to have displayed less childish weakness.

But I wish to tell you how lovable and how charming you are. You alone do not know it. You alone do not see the soft flame of your large eyes—the reflect on of your heroic soul on your young but serene brow.

Your charm is over everything you do—your slightest gesture is engraved on me. Into the most ordinary duties of every-day life you carry a peculiar grace, like a young priestess who recites her daily devotions. Your hand, your touch, your breath purifies everything—even the most humble and the most wicked beings—and myself first of all!

"Oh, how I am astonished at the words which I pronounce, and the sentiments which animate me; to whom you have made clear new truths. Yes, all the rhapsodies of the poets, all the loves of the martyrs, I comprehend in your presence. This is truth itself. I understand those who died for their faith by torture—because I should like to suffer for you—because I believe in you—because I respect you—I cherish you—I adore you!"

He stopped, shivering, and half prostrating himself before her, seized the end of her veil and kissed it.

"Now," continued he, with a kind of grave sadness, "go, Mrs. Denton; I have forgotten too long you require repose. Pardon me—proceed. I shall follow you at a distance, until you reach your home, to protect you—but fear nothing from me."

Clara Denton had listened, without once interrupting him even by a sign. Words would only excite the young man more.

Probably she understood, for the first time in her life, one of those songs of love—one of those hymns living with passion, which every woman wishes to hear before she dies.

Should she die because she had heard it?

She remained without speaking, as though just awakening from a dream, and let fall these words, soft and feeble, like a sigh:

"My God!"

After another pause, she advanced a few steps on the road.

"Give me your arm as far as my house, Mr. Leland," she said.

He obeyed her, and they continued their walk toward the house, the light of which they soon saw.

They did not exchange a word—only as they reached the gate, Mrs. Denton turned and made him a slight gesture with her hand, in sign of adieu.

In return, Leland bowed low, and withdrew.

This man had been sincere.

When true passion surprises the human soul, it breaks down all resolves, sweeps away all logic, and crushes all calculations.

In this lies its grandeur, and also its danger.

When this sublime folly possesses you, it elevates you—it transfigures you. It can suddenly convert a common man into a poet, a coward into a hero, an egotist into a martyr, and Don Juan himself into an angel of purity.

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