

BETRAYED;

A DARK MARRIAGE MORN.

A Romance of Love, Intrigue and Crime.

BY MRS. ALICE P. CARRISTON.

CHAPTER XXIV.—(Continued.)

He thought it bad taste in Clara not to have maintained longer the high ideal his innocence had created for her. Nevertheless, when he approached her house, and had the presentiment of her approving presence, he was troubled. Doubt and anxiety assailed him. When he saw through the trees the window of her room his heart throbbed so violently that he had to sit down on the root of a tree for a moment.

"I love her like a madman!" he murmured. Then, leaping up suddenly, he exclaimed: "But she is only a woman after all. I shall go on."

For the first time Clara received him in her own apartment. She was sitting in an arm-chair, and, contrary to her custom, had no work in her hands.

She appeared calm, though two vivid circles surrounded her eyes. She had evidently suffered much, and wept much. On seeing this dear face worn and haggard with grief, Leland forgot the neat phrases he had prepared for his entrance. He forgot all except that he really adored her.

He advanced hastily toward her, seized in his two hands those of the young lady, and without speaking interrogated her eyes with tenderness and profound pity.

"It is nothing," she said, withdrawing her hand and bending her pale face gently; "I am better; I may even be happy, if you pronounce an engagement of such a delicate nature."

"I demand no positive engagement of you at this time," she replied, "for I feel that would be unreasonable. You must be fully satisfied about Mildred first, or come. But if you give me any account of it all, this is what I propose: You shall secure us respectable quarters in New York, convenient to some great physician—a specialist, and we will remove there with the least possible delay; and whatever can be done to restore her completely to her former self shall be done."

"I believe—I almost know she loves you already, and if you marry her I am convinced she will make you an excellent wife. Think—do think, Mr. Leland; she is so much to me, I love her better than a sister, I regard her—I love her as though she were my own child."

Still Leland did not speak.

"Well, take time to think over it," she went on, "and return to give me your decision, should it be favorable. If not, we must bid each other adieu."

"Mr. Denton," said Leland, rising and standing before her, "I will promise never to address a word to you which a dear brother might not utter to a sister, or a son to his mother. Is it not this which you demand?"

Clara Denton fixed upon him for an instant her beautiful eyes, full of joy and gratitude, then suddenly covered her face with her two hands.

"Thanks," she murmured; "you are so good!—I am very happy!"

She extended her hand, wet with her tears, which he took and pressed to his lips. He bowed low, and left the room.

If there ever was a moment in his fatal career when the young man was worthy of admiration, it was this.

His love for Clara Denton, however unworthy of her it might be, was, nevertheless, great. It was the only true passion he had ever felt.

At the moment when he saw this love, the triumph of which he thought certain, escape him forever, he was not only wounded in his pride but was crushed in his heart. Yet he took the stroke like a gentleman.

His agony was well borne. His first bitter words, checked at once, alone betrayed what he suffered.

He was as pitiless for his own sorrows as he sought to be for those of others. He indulged in none of the common injustice habitual to discarded lovers.

He recognized the decision of Mrs. Denton as true and final, and was not tempted for a moment to mistake it for one of those equivocal arrangements by which women sometimes deceive themselves, and of which men always take advantage.

He saw that the sacred refuge he had sought was inviolable.

He neither argued nor protested against her resolve. He submitted to it, and nobly kissed the hand which smote him.

As to the miracle of courage, chastity, and faith by which Clara Denton had transformed and purified her love, he cared not to dwell upon it.

This example, which opened to his view a divine soul naked, so to speak, destroyed his theories.

One word which escaped him, while passing to his own house, proved the judgment which he passed upon it from his own point of view.

"Very childish," he muttered, "but sublime!"

with a faint smile, "but this is all so sudden and strange." Then abruptly: "But who is Mildred Lester? You have never told me, and once you promised to do so."

"She is an orphan, of good parentage, and has but one relative in the world, a brother, who is now traveling. To all intents and purposes, my father is her guardian and protector."

"She came to you under peculiar circumstances, I believe?"

"Yes, she was traveling with her brother, and was seriously injured in the great railway accident at Cos Cob. He brought her here, and hired the little cottage belonging to us on the lower road, but soon consented to her being taken into our own family."

"Her injuries affected her mind to a certain extent?"

"They affected her memory. For a long time after the fever left her, all her past life was a blank; but by little and little certain things have come back to her, and again, other things have rushed upon her memory like a great awakening, as, for instance, her music and other accomplishments. Still, she cannot recall her parents, nor any dear friends, not even her brother, and there is yet a wide gap in her past life."

"It is very singular," mused Leland. "And yet not without a parallel," said Clara. "I have been informing myself on the subject, and have found many cases quite similar."

"Generally speaking, her mind seems very bright," remarked the gentleman.

"Unusually so; she has a thirst for knowledge, and seems to comprehend, as by intuition, everything she hears and reads."

"And now you have told me all you know about her?"

"Yes, except what you already know, that she is the dearest, the best girl in all the world."

"And, seriously, you wish me to marry her?"

"Yes, it is the one great wish of my heart."

"But pardon me, dear madam. What is it you ask of me? Do you yourself fully comprehend? Have you reflected well on this? Can either of us contract, in ignorance, an engagement of such a delicate nature?"

"I demand no positive engagement of you at this time," she replied, "for I feel that would be unreasonable. You must be fully satisfied about Mildred first, or come. But if you give me any account of it all, this is what I propose: You shall secure us respectable quarters in New York, convenient to some great physician—a specialist, and we will remove there with the least possible delay; and whatever can be done to restore her completely to her former self shall be done."

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"Very childish," he muttered, "but sublime!"

The next day he left Roxbury for the great city.

One week later, Clara Denton and Mildred Lester were established in comfortable quarters on Madison avenue, only one block away from the palatial mansion which sheltered the guilty head of Cora Elliston.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE REPTILE MOVES.

The Hon. Sherwood Elliston remained in New York for some days. At the first request of his nephew, he called upon his old friend Sidney Leland, and demanded for Eugene his daughter's hand, at the same time assuring the banker that he charged himself with the future of the young couple.

In secret, Flora Leland had long admired her happiness, then, when she heard her father's announcement after dinner that day, may be imagined, but can hardly be described.

Indeed, it would be painful to dwell on the joy she felt, and her only regret was that Eugene had not come to her in person to press his suit.

But Eugene had not the heart to do so. He remained at his counting-room all the morning, and only called at the Leland's when he had learned that his overture was accepted.

Once having resolved on this monstrous action, the worst part of which he did not himself know, he was determined to carry it through in the most correct manner, and by this time he was master of all those arts.

After he had withdrawn, Flora flew to her mother, believing in Cleveland, shared her happiness, and they sat together a long time, hand clasped in hand, looking out upon the garden, dimly seen by the soft light of the stars, the daughter blessing her mother, her friends, everybody, and the mother thanking God; both glowing their hearts, their dreams, their kisses, and their tears—happy, poor women, than is permitted long to human beings under the heavens.

The marriage took place the ensuing month. Senator Elliston was present, and when he returned to Washington this time he was accompanied by his wife.

At the earnest request of his bride's parents, Eugene took up his residence with them, and Warren Leland still had a suite of apartments in the same stately and commodious mansion.

His political campaign had now opened, and he was very busy, visiting Roxbury or some other town in the Congressional district every day; but in order to be near Mrs. Denton, and particularly Mildred Lester, in whom—must we confess it?—he was beginning to feel a rapidly growing interest, he spent most of his nights in New York.

Finding presently that he could not attend to all his correspondence alone, he began to look about him for a private secretary, and soon one presented himself and was promptly engaged.

It was—Oscar Sylve!

The extraordinary session of Congress that commanded the presence of Senator Elliston in Washington was still dragging its weary length along.

Cora endured it for some time, and then, informing her husband that it was necessary for her to visit New York, she returned to that city.

A few days later Oscar Sylve threw up his situation and followed her.

The next day after his arrival he was installed as Warren Leland's private secretary.

He lived in the same house with them. His extraordinary session of Congress that commanded the presence of Senator Elliston in Washington was still dragging its weary length along.

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admire female friendships. But I did wrong to speak to you on this subject. You have wit and discretion enough to preserve the proper limits."

For some time after her marriage Flora was quite happy, but gradually she became less so; for the first enthusiasm and illusive of marriage could not for long deceive a spirit as quick and acute as hers.

A young girl who marries is easily deceived by the show of an affection of which she is the object.

It is rare that she does not adore her husband, and believe she is adored by him, simply because he has married her.

The young heart opens spontaneously and diffuses its delicate perfume of love and its soft songs of tenderness; and enveloped in this heavenly cloud all around it is love.

But little by little it frees itself, and, too often, recognizes that this delicious harmony and intoxicating atmosphere which charmed it came only from itself.

Thus was it here; as far as the pen can render the shadows of a female soul. Such were the impressions which day after day, penetrated the very soul of poor little Flo.

It was nothing more than this, but this was everything to her.

The idea of being betrayed by her husband, and that, too, with cruel premeditation, had never risen to torture her soul.

But, beyond certain delicate attentions, she felt herself disdained and slighted.

Marriage had not changed Eugene's habits; he dined at home, instead of at a restaurant or hotel, that was all.

She believed herself loved, however, but with a lightness that was almost offensive.

Yet, though she was sometimes sad and nearly in tears, you could see that she did not despair, and that this valiant little heart attached itself with intrepid confidence to a future which she believed might have in store for her.

Eugene continued very indifferent, as one may readily comprehend, to the agitation which tormented this young heart, but which never occurred to him for a moment.

For himself, strange as it may appear, he was happy enough.

This marriage had been a painful step to take; but once confirmed in his sin, he became reconciled to it.

But his conscience, seared as it was, had some living fibers in it; and he would not have failed in the duty he thought he owed to his wife.

These sentiments were composed of a sort of indifference blended with pity.

He was vaguely sorry for the poor girl, whose existence was absorbed and destroyed between those of two beings of nature superior to her own, and the fate to which she was condemned.

He resolved never to neglect anything that might extenuate its rigor; but he belonged, nevertheless, more than ever solely to the passion which was the supreme crime of his life.

For his intrigue with Cora Elliston, constantly excited by mystery and danger and conducted with profound address by a woman whose cunning was equal to her beauty, continued as strong, after months of enjoyment, as at first.

The gracious courtesy of Eugene, on which he picked himself up, as he expressed his wife, had its limits, as Flora perceived whenever she attempted to abuse it.

Thus, on several occasions, she declined receiving company, on the ground of indisposition, hoping her husband would understand her to her solitude.

She was in error.

Eugene gave her, in reality, under these circumstances, a tete-a-tete of a few moments after dinner; but later he would leave her with perfect tranquility.

Perhaps in an hour she would receive a package of bonbons, or a pretty basket of choice fruit, that would permit her to pass the evening as best she might.

These little gifts she sometimes shared with her mother, sometimes with Sylve, her brother's secretary.

Sylve, for whom she had at first conceived an aversion, was gradually getting into her good graces.

In the absence of Eugene, she always found him at hand, and referred to him for many little details, such as addresses, invitations, the selection of books, and the purchase of pictures.

From this came a certain familiarity; she began to call him Sylve, or friend Sylve, while he zealously performed all her little commissions.

He manifested for her a great deal of respectful attention, and even refrained from indulging in the skeptical sneers which he knew displeased her.

Happy to witness this reform and to testify her gratitude, she invited him to remain on two or three evenings when he came to her rooms to take his leave, and talked with him of books and the theater.

Being indisposed for some little time, Eugene passed the first two evenings with her until nine o'clock. But this effort fatigued him, and the poor woman who had already erected an edifice for the future on this frail basis had the mortification of observing that on the third evening he had resumed his bachelor habits.

This was a great blow to her, and her sadness became greater than it had been up to that time—so much so, in fact, that solitude was almost unbearable.

Unfortunately, her father and mother were away, and in the intervals she adopted the habit of retreating to Sylve, or even sending for him. Eugene himself, three-fourths of the time, would bring him in before going out in the evening.

"I bring you Sylve, my dear," he would say, and a good author. You can read him together."

But Sylve, whenever he looked at her, wore such a sympathetic air and seemed so mortified when she did not invite him to stay, that, even when wearied of him, she frequently did so.

About the end of the month Sylve was alone with Flora until ten o'clock in the evening. They were reading "Faust," which she had never before heard.

This reading seemed to interest the lady more than usual, and with her eyes fixed on the reading, she listened with rapt attention.

She was not alone fascinated by the work, but, as frequently in the case, she traced her own history across the grand fiction of the poet.

We all know with what strange clairvoyance a mind possessed with a fixed idea discovers resemblances and allusions in accidental description. Flora perceived without doubt some remote connection between her husband and Faust—between herself and Marguerite—for she could not help showing that she was strongly agitated.

When Marguerite in prison cries out in her agony and madness, a blending of confused sentiments of powerful sympathies, of vague apprehension, suddenly seized on her breast. One can scarcely imagine their force—to the verge of distracting her.

She turned on the lounge and closed her beautiful eyes, as if to keep back the tears which rolled under the fringe of her beautiful lashes.

At this moment Sylve ceased to read, dropped his book, sighed profoundly, and stared for a moment.

Then he threw himself at Flora's feet, took her hand, and said with a tragic sigh: "Poor angel!"

"Heaven! I do it to be agreeable to you. Is not Mrs. Elliston a good associate?"

"Excellent; only in general I do not

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