

ON WHEELS OF FIRE.

BY FITZGERALD MOLLOY.

Author of "How Came He Dead?" "An Excellent Knave," "Sweet is Revenge," "A Modern Magician," "That Villain Romeo," &c.

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CHAPTER XV. STELLA RETURNS.

When Stella had told Crawford she hoped he might never cross her path or darken her life again, he, without making a sign or speaking a word in reply, left the hotel for a long walk, taking Myles Newbury as his companion. For many a mile they sped, the high winds tearing past them, buffeting their cheeks and flapping the capes and corners of their macintoshes, sharp, sudden showers blowing in their faces, the roar of the sea continuously in their ears.

It was long before the earl spoke, for his mind was dwelling on the scene in which he had acted so painful, and at one time what seemed so dangerous a role. It was necessary, he assured himself, to part with Stella, first because he had grown weary of her, and secondly because she would injure his prospects, and therefore she must go. In his heart he had no pity for the woman he had wronged; he had no remorse for the part he had played.

After awhile he sought to dismiss the disagreeable picture of what had just passed from his thoughts, and to conjure up another and a brighter by hearing more of Samuel Gubbs and his daughter.

On their return to the hotel, that which the earl had expected and desired had happened; Stella had departed. Who she had gone, or what she had purposed doing, did not now trouble him; she was not there to upbraid or to implore, and her future, which could not touch or clash with his, no longer concerned him. He was relieved by her absence, and grateful for the delicacy that suggested a hasty removal. She had ever shown consideration for his feelings and deference towards his tastes, and so much could not be said of every woman he had encountered.

Whilst he had been out, Stella, who was steeped in misery, left desolate and covered with shame, determined to leave him at once, and to return to her home. She had deceived her father in his trustfulness, but he would not desert her in her need; and now when her heart was broken, she longed to shed tears of penitence upon his breast, and to feel his protecting arms round her. Hastily she dressed herself in the clothes she had worn the morning she quitted her peaceful home, determined to leave behind all those for which she was indebted to the man who had wronged her; and she felt glad to know she had in her possession enough money of her own as would carry her to Howstree.

With a thick veil drawn across a face swollen and red with tears, she quietly left the hotel, and walking down the pier entered the saloon of the boat, which, in a short time, would leave for Folkstone. She sat in the darkest corner she could find, listening warily and apprehensively to the footsteps on deck, and to every voice that sounded in her ears. For her only desire now was to escape, and she feared that Crawford might strive to prevent her. Even in the midst of her nervous dread she knew that was improbable, but what could have been more unexpected than what had taken place that day?

But if he did not seek her Newbury might, and she shrank from contact with him, with whom she believed her trouble originated; or again it might be that Arthur Ferrars would journey homewards by this boat, judge from her manner something terrible had happened, wonder that she was unaccompanied by Crawford, and conclude that to shield him she had lied. And so whilst she suffered agonies of fear the time passed, her senses strained for sounds of familiar steps or voices, her head aching from the confined smell of the saloon and the rocking of the boat, her heart weighed by the load of her grief.

It seemed an eternity before the steamer left Boulogne harbor and got out into the storm-lashed sea. A sense of relief fell upon her when those whose presence she dreaded had not appeared. Dimly and darkly her future rose before her, but the confusion of her mind was so great she could not analyze or meet it; her one great longing was to gain the shelter of the home and the protection of the father she had so lightly and so hopefully abandoned.

The passage across the channel took double its usual time because of the roughness of the weather. How she ever made the journey to Howstree she could never after distinctly remember; but vague recollections remained of the crowded platform at Charing Cross station late in the evening; of being driven across London, the streets of which looked black and desolate in the drenching rain and under a canopy of ominous clouds; of staying at a railway station hotel where she passed a restless and feverish night; and of setting forward on the last stage of her journey on the following midday.

It was far advanced in the afternoon when she reached the nearest station to Howstree. Here her desire was to escape notice, and with her thick veil down and her cloak drawn closely round her she left the station, resolved to walk homewards slowly, so that it might be dark when she reached her father's cottage.

Stunned as her mind was she could not refrain from making comparisons between the afternoon of her return and the morning when she had left to become the wife of him she loved. The thought was maddening and she knew such reflections must be banished if she would retain consciousness until she reached her goal. Yet every step of the way taunted her with memories of a past whose unclouded happiness and joyous freedom from care, come what might, could return no more.

The misery which had befallen her had struck at her strength, which was furthermore exhausted by her journey and by want of that food she had found it impossible to take. So that the five miles walk tried her, and it was with slow and weary steps the last part of it was traversed. On coming within sight of the church tower her heart sank and her senses well nigh deserted her; she sat by the roadside and waited till she had partially recovered. Then she struggled forward until the red brick chimneys of her father's cottage were within view, when strung to renewed efforts she hastened onwards.

Arriving at the white wall dividing the little garden from the roadway she paused and looked through the window, the blinds of which were not drawn. The room was lighted by a lamp on the centre table, seated at which was her father, quite alone and reading. There was the same dear round-shouldered figure glad in its

shabby coat, his iron gray hair touching his collar, his calm pale face bent in the old familiar attitude above his book. She could see no more because of the tears that rushed into her eyes. Guiding herself by the wall she noiselessly thrust forward and shut the little garden gate, and walking softly up the pathway opened the door which as usual was on the latch. Then crossing the tiny hall, in another second she stood upon the threshold of the sitting room and uttered one word: "Father!"

With a start the schoolmaster dropped his book and rose tremulously to his feet; that with an exclamation that expressed love, joy and wonder he rushed forward and clasped her in his arms, kissing her burning face and pressing her to his heart. "Stella, my Stella, my dear child, my little one," he murmured fondly, his voice expressing his delight, for his eyes were too dim to see the heart-breaking sadness of her countenance.

"I have come back," she said between her sobs. "I have come back to you."

"But not alone?" he suggested, looking forward in expectation of seeing another figure.

"Quite alone."

"But where is your husband?" the schoolmaster asked, something in the tones of her voice startling him.

"I have no husband," she replied with trembling lips.

"Dead?" cried the old man in terror.

"No," she whispered, hiding her face on his shoulder whilst she tried to repress the storm shaking her frame.

"He—he deceived me; our marriage was a mockery; he has grown tired of me and cast me off."

Jacob Selwyn could not at first realize the sense of her words, but when it broke upon him his first thought was one of pity for her. "My poor child, my own darling, did the scoundrel dare to wrong you? O God, that such a villain should live!" he said, tightening his arms around her as if to protect her against the world and to shelter her in his heart.

"Oh, father, I loved him once only too well," she said between her sobs. "and I thought myself his wife until the hour I left him. You believe me—you believe that?"

"Yes, Stella, I know you would not do wrong. The sin is not yours, but his, and he will reap its punishment—the scoundrel!"

"Don't talk of that, dear."

"Thank God you have come back to me," he replied, kissing her once more. "Oh, that I were near the villain! I would take his life. Such a villain should not be permitted to live," he cried out his eyes bright from excitement, his usually pale face flushed with anger, his limbs trembling from emotion.

Stella sank into a chair exhausted, and her father seeing how worn and weary she looked brought her wine, which he forced her to drink, and food which he forced her to eat. The woman who attended on his own modest wants had gone home for the night, and no one had seen Stella enter the cottage. Then he threw some wood upon the fire, for the evening was raw and damp, and made her sit in his own great chair beside the hearth.

The ruddy glow of the blaze fell warmly on the familiar walls, and glistened on the glass of the old engraving and wood worked pictures, and tinged the pale, earnest face whose eyes were fixed anxiously upon her. All remained untouched and unaltered as when she had left; all that had happened since her departure might have been a dream, from which this was the tardy awakening. Would it had been a dream, and but a terrible reality.

Presently when she had laid aside her bonnet and cloak, and had somewhat mastered the choking sensation in her throat, she told her father the history of her life since she had quitted his home; told him of her journey to London; of being met at the station by Crawford and driven through a wilderness of close streets and busy thoroughfares, until they arrived at that dark and gloomy house he called his own, where a man dressed as a parson awaited them and read the marriage service; of their departure for Switzerland and their travels through foreign lands.

Then she dwelt sadly on the evening of their arrival at Milan and his receipt of a certain letter, from which time his manner had changed towards her; she mentioned their stay in Paris, and finally she spoke of that miserable day at Boulogne, when he told her she was not his wife; of her fruitless appeal, of the arrival of Arthur Ferrars, and of the false statement she had made to him.

"You should have told Arthur the truth, and let him give the scoundrel the chastisement he deserved," said the schoolmaster, whose agitation scarce permitted him to speak.

"But there would have been bloodshed and I would not have the friend who sought to avenge me injured; nor yet the man who wronged me."

"I will find him myself, and give him the punishment he deserves from a father's hands," Jacob Selwyn said, pacing the room backwards and forwards, forgetful of his age and lack of strength in his righteous desire to bring the betrayer to book. Then pausing, he asked, "Where is Arthur now?"

"I don't know," answered Stella, adding after a pause, "I cannot bear to see him again. Only now, when I myself have been deceived, do I realize the wrong I did him. No, we must meet no more. No more," and tears streamed down her cheeks.

"He would not resent your leaving him, he would only pity you, my dear child—my poor Stella."

"But don't you understand, father, that his pity would be hardest to bear," she cried out.

"But I dare say you will have to meet him some day."

"Nor necessarily," she replied.

"How is that Stella?"

"Because, dear father, I don't intend to remain here."

"Where would you go?" he asked, anxiously.

"There, at all events, I can keep my secret."

"And you would leave me?" the schoolmaster said, reproachfully.

"Because it would be best for you, dear," she replied, striving to be brave when most tempted to be weak.

"Stella, my dear," he said tenderly, as sitting beside her he took her hands in his, "you are the only child I have to live in all the world, and without you life would be more cheerless than life grave."

She flung her arms round his neck and kissed him again and again. "It was for your sake, dear, as much as my own, I thought of leaving you," she replied, "but if you wish it I will remain here and we shall not be parted. Perhaps it is best I should bear what I deserve."

"No, we shall not be parted," he repeated, and then after a struggle he added, "but you need not remain here, dear."

"What do you mean, father?" she asked, gulping down her tears.

"That you and I will go abroad into the world and begin life anew."

"No, dear, I cannot accept the sacrifice," she rejoined. "I could not take you away from this peaceful village which you love, from the old college friend who is to you as a brother, from the kindly neighbors who esteem you, from all you hold dear, in order to go with me into a strange world and amongst strange people. No, dear, I am not so selfish as that."

"But you are more to me than friend or neighbor."

"I will stay here with you," she answered calmly.

"No, Stella, now when you have told me the pain it would cost you, I would not have you remain. Together we will go into the world, where none will know of the wrong you have suffered, where a new life, and perhaps a happier, will open before us, in which the past may be blotted from your memory, or remembered as a troubled dream."

"How brave and unselfish you are, father, and how weak and ungrateful I have been," she answered, striving to smile upon him.

"No, dear, not unselfish, for it would pain me to see you slighted or made to suffer here; and then I should not be separated from you; so you see I am utterly selfish after all."

But this sophistry could not deceive her, nor could his gentle smile hide the pain it sought to conceal. Knowing what this determination must have cost him, and how much she was overcome by gratitude and remorse, and laying her head on his breast she sobbed like a child. He did not seek to check her tears, knowing they would relieve her heart, and not until they had almost ceased to flow did he say: "We must never part again, Stella."

"Never," she said, "so long as God in His mercy will allow us together."

Then they sat by the fire, side by side, as in the olden time before the joy of that new love which had so soon turned to misery had filled her heart; making plans for the future and picturing to themselves the life that lay before them. Yet nothing did they imagine so eventful where much must be of import, as that which afterwards befel them.

CHAPTER XVI. THE NEW EARL RETURNS.

On his return to London the new earl of Redfriars drove to the rooms recently occupied by his brother. No unpleasant thoughts of the tragedy which had occurred there hindered him from taking possession. Weary of hotel life, he contemplated settling down here in peace. He had neither apartments nor habitation of his own, and he was aware that his brother's flat, which was leased for the next two years, was comfortable.

On his arrival he was met by his brother's servant, Whyman, a tall, grave man of more than middle age, with a well set, upright figure, dark, clean-shaven face, and steady brown eyes, expressing force, reflection and reserve. By arrangement with Myles Newbury he had remained as caretaker of his late master's rooms until the coming of the new earl, who had the option of retaining his services. A telegram having prepared him for the return of Lord Redfriars, Whyman had set all things in order; dyes blazed in dining, sitting and bed rooms, the dinner table was laid, and that meal already ordered from a neighboring restaurant.

Redfriars, being sensitive to surroundings, was pleased by these attentions. The look of warmth, the air of snugness, the appearance of solid comfort were most agreeable to him after the chill staidness, dreary splendor and draughty spaciousness of foreign apartments.

"Dinner ready, Whyman?" Redfriars said, looking round with satisfaction.

"It will be served immediately, my lord," the man answered, and then noiselessly disappeared.

By the time the earl had changed his clothes the soup was on the table, and then followed a meal such as was sure to commend itself to a traveler, light, dainty and appetizing. The wines were well selected and the cigars which Whyman produced were of excellent brand. The new peer thoroughly enjoyed himself and stretched his legs under the table with an air of satisfaction, as he reflected that his brother had done a wise thing in removing himself from the path of one who could better fill his place.

Physically they had been as much alike as twins; their height, build, complexion, and gait being so similar that one was continually mistaken for the other, much to the elder man's displeasure. But here all resemblance between them ended; for mentally and morally they were as diverse as the poles. There was little to recommend and much to condemn in the character of the present peer. Scrupulous in all things he had little belief in the virtue or honor of man or woman. Selfishness being the dominant note in his nature he had never hesitated to inflict on others the pain or misery which he shrank from enduring himself. Reckless in his extravagance he had plunged deeply into debt, careless of to-morrow and its consequences so long as he reaped enjoyment to-day.

The late Lord Redfriars had been grave and thoughtful from his youth; given to study, interested in science, philanthropic. No scandal had ever been associated with his name; he had injured no man; wronged no woman. Soon after his thirtieth year he had succeeded his spendthrift father, and recognizing the responsibility of his position and the embarrassed state of his affairs he had striven hard by retrenchment to lift the heavy load of debt from his ancestral acres. His natural love of retirement, his indifference to luxury, his hatred of display rendered this task more easy of accomplishment to him than to an individual of a different disposition; yet for one man to undo what generations had done, was a difficult task. There was hope, however, of eventual success, and it could not have been either depression or despair on this ground that had driven him to the terrible act by which he had ended his life.

The deed was so out of keeping with his character, so wholly unlike what might have been expected of him, that at times doubts had risen in his brother's mind as to whether the murder was self-inflicted or not. But on this point neither the doctors nor the jury had hesitated; the manner in which the pistol wound had been inflicted clearly pointed to suicide; there was no motive for murder perceptible, none could be supposed or imagined, nor could the act have been committed without the knowledge of Whyman, a faithful and devoted servant.

Was there mystery here? Why had the late lord, at a moment when he had the prospect of a happy marriage with the girl he loved, and when his economy and management were bearing fruit on the estates—why had he taken his life? Was there some spectre of the past which he dreaded? Surely not, for his life had been blameless. Was there aught in his future he feared so much as to make him flee from its coming? Such thoughts and questions continually presented themselves before his successor's mind; not that the latter cared much, whether remorse or terror or suffering had beset his brother and driven him to a desperate end, but that some vague idea continually haunted him, that whatever it was that had cast its shadow on the dead man's path and exercised so terrible an effect, might some day all unexpectedly cross his own.

Even as he lay back in his chair enjoying his after-dinner cigar, and dwelling on his promising future, such thoughts beset him, and to escape from them he rose and entered the sitting-room. The flat was situated on the first floor of one of those grey, solidly built houses erected two hundred years ago in Hanover square. The apartment boasted that spaciousness and loftiness unknown to modern mansions; ceilings and cornices were elaborately ornamented; the walls covered with oak paneling, fortunately preserved from the desecration of the paint brush, the windows high, narrow, and deeply recessed.

An atmosphere pervaded them such as became their age and associations. Histories they surely had of paramount interest to those who figured in them, but all forgotten now. Generations had entered and quitted life within their precincts; the walls had heard strange tales, had echoed with laughter and song; the windows, like great staring eyes, had gazed on many a changing scene. Ghosts may have, in the dull watches of the night, thronged the wide passages, or glided through those heavy doors with their deep moutings of tarnished brass.

The long and narrow sitting room which Lord Redfriars entered was lighted by standard lamps, clusters of candles and by a bright fire blazing in the broad grate beneath a noble chimney-piece of white marble, time-stained and delicately carved with wreaths of flowers upheld by corpulent Cupids, and satyr eternally leering at scantily clad nymphs. Above, in a massive gilt frame, hung a portrait of the eleventh earl, who had so royally wasted his substance in roisterous living; facing him, on the opposite side of the wall, was his long-suffering wife. Curtains of faded brown velvet were drawn across windows and doors; well-stocked book shelves filled recesses made by the projecting fireplace; an escritoire black with age stood close by, and beyond were cabinets rich in old Italian carving, their tops supporting terra cotta statuettes and Belgian pottery, whose deep blue color and quaint graceful shapes stood out against the sombre background of the paneling.

Notwithstanding the yellow light streaming from the lamps and candles, and the ruddy reflection from the fire, the apartment had something gloomy in its appearance that depressed its occupant. He sat down in a great high-backed arm chair beside the hearth, and smoked and thought. Little traffic passing through the square no sound disturbed the silence of the early night, save the melancholy chiming of the clock of St. George's church. The world might be asleep or dead for all signs it gave of life or waking.

Though the burning coals throw out the heat, Redfriars was conscious of a chill; there was something icy in the atmosphere. He strove to recall the source of satisfaction he had recently felt, but deep depression crept over and enveloped him as in a mist. What was its cause or its nature, he could not state; it was undefined, vague, irresistible. His mind promptly scouted all ideas of such subtle influences as are said to be exercised on the living by the dead. He believed that once a man quitted existence annihilation ensued; there was no such thing as soul, spirit, or consciousness, only a handful of clay, and nothing more. Therefore, neither fear nor thought of an invisible and unknown world and those who dwell therein arose in his mind; the mood besetting him was due to physical causes—fatigue, indigestion or over-wrought brain.

From reading the reports of the inquest held upon his brother he was aware that it was in this room the suicide had been committed. Perhaps during the last hour of his life the dead man had sat in his high-backed chair meditating even as he now filled it; meditated; but what was the subject of his thoughts? Redfriars would have given much to know, for they would have afforded a clue to the motive of the desperate deed.

Unconsciously he allowed the fire to get low, so that the ruddy blaze was no longer reflected on the time-stained oak of the walls. The position of a lamp caused his figure to cast a blurred, horrible shadow on the high ceiling. A feeling of languor gradually possessed him, and with it that strange foreboding of an undefined ill increased. All at once it seemed as if a second person was in the room, hiding in the shelter of the cabinet behind him, and then drawing near with a stealthy and gliding step, intent on evil purposes.

Then the thought of his brother, whom he had never loved even in the days of his boyhood he envied and hated, came into his mind with terrible force, so that for a second he almost believed the dead was present, loaming over him and breathing jelly upon his head. With an effort he sprang to his feet. An old mirror framed in black ebony hung above him, and as he rose involuntarily glanced into it, when with a frozen heart he drew back startled, dismayed and horrified. He had seen a reflection of his own face, paler and graver than usual, and fancied he beheld the features of the dead.

Quickly recovering, a reaction set in and he laughed at his weakness. Going over to a table on which Whyman had placed a decanter of brandy

he poured out a glass and drank it at a draught. The liquid warmed and cheered him, and he walked up and down the room by way of regaining his composure, finally standing before the bookshelves and taking down some volumes looked at them carelessly. They were not such as he would read. Herodotus and Plato in the original, Montaigne's Essays, Waldon's Life of Moreau, and the Vicar of Wakefield had no attraction for him. Mechanically he went to one of the old cabinets and pulled out a drawer, when his eyes fell upon a pistol.

He had no doubt it was the weapon with which his brother had taken his life; it fascinated him so that he could not remove his eyes from it, and with a trembling hand he took it from its resting place. The smoke of that last shot still tarnished the brightness of the barrel; lower down was a stain where some blood clot or brain tissue may have lain. As he grasped the revolver he experienced a wild horror, confusion of mind, and sickness of heart, such as the dead man might have felt when his nervous clutch closed upon the handle for the last time; and, involuntarily, Redfriars, having a finger on the trigger raised the pistol slowly to his forehead until the cold steel touched his left temple. Then, dropping it, he turned away, terror-stricken at the act, cold perspiration oozing from his body.

He drank more brandy, lit a cluster of candles on the chimney place, and threw some coals upon the fire. Presently he looked at the escritoire which Newbury had, with some other articles, sealed up, until the new earl's return, and standing before it he said, "I may find there the traces of the secret I want; some scrap of paper, diary or letter may betray the fear which drove him to death. To-morrow I will begin my search."

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(TO BE CONTINUED.)

LIQUOR'S CURSE.

A Drunken Father Fatally Attacks His Sleeping Children.

FORTORIA, O., July 14.—Word has just reached this city of a horrible case of paternal cruelty at Pemberton, a small town north of this city. William Cook, a section foreman, went home in a beastly drunken condition and went to the bed where his four children were sleeping and made a murderous assault upon them with a matted handle.

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DR. OTTMAN

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DRS. FRANCE AND OTTMAN, after years of experience, have discovered the greatest cure known for weakness in the back and limbs, involuntary discharges, impotency, general debility, nervousness, languor, confusion of ideas, palpitation of the heart, timidity, trembling, dimness of sight, or giddiness, diseases of the head, throat, nose, or skin, affections of the liver, lungs, stomach, or bowels—those terrible disorders arising from the solitary vice of youth—and secret practices, blighting their most radiant hopes or anticipations, rendering marriage impossible. Take one candid thought before it is too late. A week or month may place your case beyond the reach of hope. Our method of treatment will speedily and permanently cure the most obstinate case, and absolutely restore perfect manhood.

TO MIDDLE-AGED MEN.—There are many from the age of 30 to 60 who are troubled with frequent evacuations of the bladder, often accompanied by a slight burning or smarting sensation, weakening the system in a manner the patient cannot account for. On examination of the urinary deposits, aropy sediment will be found, or the color will be thin or milky blue. There are many men who die of this difficulty, ignorant of the cause, which is a second stage of seminal weakness. We will guarantee a perfect cure in all such cases, and a healthy restoration of the genito-urinary organs.

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