

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 XXXV.

REVELATIONS.

Arthur Ferrars resolved that he should first of all on his return from seeing Virgil Lechmere bear the news to Stella that the marriage ceremony which she had been assured was a mockery was in every way legal; that she was not only a wife but a peeress of the realm.

He knew her sufficiently well to feel assured the latter item of intelligence would concern her but little in comparison with the former. What a surprise it would be to hear, what a triumph it would be to know that she was what she had once believed herself—Harry Crawford's wife. Ferrars pictured her joy and satisfaction on learning what he had to narrate, the while he battled bravely to keep under his own feelings of regret, and his own sense of loss. His love for her made him desire her happiness even at the cost of his own.

During the intervals of sleep that overtook him whilst journeying to London he dreamt of Stella, and always in the background stood the figure of her husband—malignant, treacherous and cruel. His sleep brought him little refreshment and no peace, and he preferred to remain awake, but his waking hours also had their dreams. No doubt Stella, with her sweet and torquing nature would pardon this man the bitter wrong he had done her, the grievous insult he had offered her, the crime he sought to commit by making another woman his wife. And in course of time she would give him again the affection he had proved himself unworthy to possess. For, he concluded, there was nothing a woman would not pardon in the man she loves.

It was near 7 o'clock when he reached the schoolmaster's cottage, with its climbing plants and its garden fragrant and full of color. Seen in the light of the waning sun the homestead looked peaceful and calm, giving no indication of the storm and the stress through which its inmates had passed within the last few hours.

As he went quickly up the pathway Stella and her father, who were sitting silently, thoughtfully, and without appetite at their high-tea, caught sight of him. The schoolmaster started, rose, and went to the door to receive him.

"You are welcome, Arthur, my boy, you're welcome; come in, come in." Something in Ferrars' radiant air and in his mood of scarce repressed satisfaction was out of keeping with the melancholy and weariness expressed on the faces of those before him. Stella's hand was hot and feverish, her pale, pathetic face bore traces of excitement, her eyes had that look at once of trust and shyness which they had expressed on the day of their unexpected encounter.

"Sit down, sit down; we were just having our tea," said the schoolmaster. Ferrars got himself a chair, and Stella brought a cup and saucer to the table, on which was a beefsteak pie, and a rhubarb tart, whilst here and there upon the snowy cloth stood little opal bud vases, holding yellow roses that scented the air.

"Thanks, I'll have some tea, I'm thirsty," Ferrars said. "And a little of this," Jacob suggested, touching the crisp, brown crust of the pie with the carving knife.

"Yes, I believe I'm also hungry." He had snatched but a hurried meal in London and now became conscious of a craving for food which he immediately strove to satisfy. Stella and her father ate little and appeared absent-minded; the former on recalling her attention to her guest invariably fixed a look of anxious inquiry on his face. She expected and knew he had something to communicate.

"You have seen Virgil Lechmere?" she said at last, in a low voice, as she bent towards him.

"Yes, how did you know?" "Miss Gubbs told me." "Of course. I had it time to let you know I was going, or the object of my journey. I've something strange to tell you, something that will surprise you greatly."

"We know, we know," she answered, hurriedly and confusedly.

"Who he is—the scoundrel that deceived her," Jacob replied. "He is Lord Redfriars."

"Yes, yes." Ferrars looked at them in surprise. "How long have you known this?" he enquired, a little coolly, wondering they had kept this information from him.

"Only a few hours; had I been aware of it before, I should have told you," Stella remarked.

"What else do you know?" "Nothing more," Jacob said in a melancholy voice.

"But how did you come to hear this?" The schoolmaster told him what had taken place that afternoon at the Manor, becoming greatly disturbed as he recounted the scene.

"Then you have learned but half the truth; something more important remains behind," Ferrars remarked, gravely.

"Concerning me?" asked Stella, in a trembling voice.

"Concerning you. Be prepared to hear something strange."

She lay back in her chair with an air of fatigue, her face grew paler than before. What disastrous news was she to hear?

"What is it?" the schoolmaster asked, eagerly.

"The marriage ceremony which that man said was a mockery was in reality a perfectly legal rite. Stella is his wife." Profound silence followed; both hearers stared at the speaker questioning, amazedly, fixedly.

filled her with deeper melancholy than she had yet known—a melancholy that took the hues of despair; she could have cried out in pity for herself; she longed to shed tears because of the bitterness of her fate.

For there came before her vividly the remembrance of her love, and the return which that love had met. Gladly she would have died for her husband then, did but her death secure him happiness, and how had he repaid the wealth of her affection? In a few months he had begun to weary of and to neglect her; he had basely lied to her concerning their marriage, proved deaf to prayers that might have roused pity in the blindest and hardest heart; flung her aside heedless of what became of her; behaved as a coward when one who really loved her would have acted as her defender; protected himself under a statement she then believed false; sought to become a bigamist; and finally and willfully and cruelly slandered her, his wife—the woman who had so loved and trusted him.

And this was the man who was her husband; it was to him she was bound irrevocably for life. Nothing which had happened previously was so hard to bear. To what misery had joy led her?

Arthur Ferrars, watching her closely, saw there was no brightness in her eyes, no joy upon her face, only the shadows of sorrow, the weariness of despair. And seeing her, and being human, he rejoiced; for he knew now that her love towards the man who had stolen her from him was dead for ever and could nevermore be revived.

"Stella," her father said, "Stella, you don't speak."

"No, father; I am thinking."

The schoolmaster rose, and coming to her side kissed her fondly, but she made no response.

"This is great news our good friend has brought us," he said, struggling with his emotion. "You are glad and grateful?"

"No, father."

The schoolmaster drew back in astonishment.

"Don't you yet realize that you are his wife?"

"Fully—but to be the wife of such a man is the greatest degradation I could know."

"He has behaved cruelly and wickedly, but you must strive to forget the past and forgive him."

"I can forgive but I cannot forget," she replied, firmly.

Jacob Selwyn felt puzzled. Gratification at the knowledge of his daughter's marriage was uppermost in his mind, and he was disappointed that it was not shared by her whom this feeling most concerned. Turning to Ferrars he asked, "Have you told him yet of your discovery?"

"No, I came here first with the news, but to-morrow I will give him the option of publishing his marriage before the world, or of having it done by me."

"I have no wish to force my claims upon him," said Stella.

"But it must be done, Stella, in justice to yourself, as a vindication of your honor."

"I have done no wrong and the world's judgment troubles me but little."

"You will take your proper position as his wife, my dear," said the schoolmaster, with some sense of pride rising in his mind.

"He will never be more to me than he is at present."

"Time will change your opinion," her father remarked.

"Time will never alter my determination. Nothing would ever induce me to live with such a man."

Her father turned away. However she might act, whatever she might say, she was a wife; and this fact rested with him above all other considerations, bringing with it a sense of peace and a feeling of satisfaction to which he, poor man, had long been a stranger.

"You must let the family at the Manor know," he said.

"Yes, I will go at once; Gubbs will be terribly surprised."

"And indignant."

"What an escape his daughter has had."

The artist stood up to depart, and Stella, who had remained silent, absorbed and sorrowful, gave him her hand which was cold as ice. He felt it tremble in his, and a sudden thought which seemed like a flash of inspiration crossed his mind.

Could it be that all unexpectedly that was given him which he had never before fully possessed—given him now when an impassable barrier had risen between them?

He glanced at her eyes to find confirmation of his surmise, but they were lowered, and her hand was quickly withdrawn. Recovering himself with an effort he drew a deep breath, and went towards the door accompanied by Jacob, who was all oblivious of what had passed.

"Good night, and God bless you," said the schoolmaster, "for you have brought me news that has lifted a heavy load from my heart."

Ferrars smiled at the mockery of Fate, and with weary steps and despairing thoughts slowly took his way through the park. It was little more than eight o'clock and this summer evening had not yet faded to-night. The atmosphere was close and heavy as if a storm were brewing; vapory clouds had begun their travels through space.

Gubbs looked up with surprise and shook hands coolly with the artist.

"I fear I disturb you, but I have something important to say," Ferrars began.

"Then, children, you had better run away—I say run away."

"It's not necessary that they should go. I've been to see Virgil Lechmere."

Samuel Gubbs frowned above his glasses.

"I was already aware of that," he remarked, stiffly.

"He is Lord Redfriars' cousin, as you know, and was present at his marriage, as you didn't know."

"At whose marriage?"

"The artist's."

"When did it take place?" asked Gubbs, in wild amazement.

"About twelve months ago. The bride was Stella Selwyn."

"Do you mean to say, sir, Lord Redfriars is a married man?" he asked, horror-stricken by what he heard.

"Yes. He's Stella's husband."

"But—but he proposed to marry my child—my Ada."

"He was willing to commit bigamy."

The spectacles dropped from the merchant's nose, his face grew red, his hands clutched the arms of his chair.

"The scoundrel! Would he have dared—would he have dared—"

"He married Stella when he was simply Harry Crawford. On succeeding to the title he told her their marriage was a mere pretense. He trusted to her credulity and in her inability to find him under his title if she wished to do so."

"My child, my child, what a merciful escape," Samuel Gubbs muttered, and he held out his arms. Ada went over to him, and he embraced and kissed her lovingly.

"I will make him repent it, the monster."

"The law cannot touch him."

"The villain—he would have ruined my child," the merchant said, in a voice broken by emotion. "Thank God she has escaped." He leaned his elbows on his desk beside him and covered his face with his hands. Ada bent over him, one arm round his shoulder. Ferrars beckoned to Bobbie, and they left the room quietly.

"What a scoundrel. But I've been to blame; I made no inquiries, I was dazzled by his rank and his smooth manner. He made a fool of me—but you are saved, my girl, you are saved," Gubbs said in a hoarse tone.

"I would never have married him."

"You were right, and I was wrong; you judged him better than I did. But think how he sought to ruin us.—The adventurer, the miserable scoundrel; such men should not be allowed to live; I'll expose him before the world; there must be some way to punish such a ruffian. What a fool I've been, what a fool I've been—I was blind—he deceived me—I could strangle him!"

"I fear, father, you were not quite just to others because of him."

"True, I believed his lies when he told me Lechmere was a forger, that he had robbed him. I don't believe it now—not a word, not a word."

"How could you ever have believed it of Virgil?"

"It was his own cousin, his scoundrelly cousin who told me."

"Virgil is honorable, and you, dear, behaved badly to him. Would you not like to make some reparation?"

"What can I do, girl? What can I do?"

"He has been very ill, he has no home, no friends. Ask him here; let him remain with us until—at least until he recovers."

"Here—but that would be—"

"Kind. Father, I love him with all my heart and I will never marry any other man. He is so honorable that though he loves me, he wouldn't tell me so whilst he was under your roof. When he knew you intended me to marry the earl, Virgil would not interfere by even a word. You don't know him, dear, but ask him here and study him and you will see how noble, how good he is."

but stood before him, tall, full of unappreciated force, his expression showing the contempt and loathing he felt. Redfriars never flinched under that steady gaze, his lips were tightly closed, his breath came heavy and regular through his distended nostrils, the hands he held behind his back twitched nervously.

"We have met before," said the artist, after a moment of silence that seemed ominous to the earl.

"I remember."

"Otherwise I should have had to recall the scene in the Boulogne hotel to your memory."

Redfriars contented himself with bowing, slightly elevating his eyebrows at the same time, and giving a faint indication of mockery to the expression of his face.

"Oward as you are, on that day you sheltered yourself behind a statement which she who made it believed false, but which you knew was true."

Redfriars instantly recognized that his marriage was known to Ferrars; how or when the discovery was made he did not care to inquire; that it was useless to deny was plain.

"Even then her loyalty to you, her desire to save you failed to touch your heart or awaken your conscience. Instead of honestly owning her there and then that you had foolishly wronged her, and then grievously lied to her, you continued to let her believe she was your victim; you flung her aside, careless of what became of one who, by every tie and every right, should have been your nearest and dearest."

Ferrars, striving to control himself, spoke with the feeling of pity his words re-awoke; but this emotion found no echo in his hearer, who, pale and motionless, was seemingly unmoved.

"You left her to the temptations of the world," continued the artist; "you exposed her to the pity or the scorn of her friends. Your act if more refined was not less cruel than that of the brute who kicks his helpless wife to death."

"The case is stated forcibly," assented Redfriars, who strove to hide his uneasiness under the superciliousness he assumed.

"But not satisfied with such wrongs, you a couple of days since sought to slander her in the face of the new friends she had made. There's no depth of infamy too base for you to reach; you are a disgrace to humanity."

"Perhaps you're right," assented the earl. "I think I've never had any moral sense; it was left out of my character."

Ferrars stared at him in surprise; his first thought being that the man was mad, a second idea suggested that this assumption of lightness was a mask for shame and remorse. In this he was mistaken, for Redfriars was unacquainted with shame, and had never experienced remorse.

"You mustn't judge all men by yourself," continued the earl, "that would be a serious mistake. I, for instance, would suffer much by comparison; we are not all made alike, you know."

"If all men were as unprincipled as you life would be unendurable."

"Perhaps," agreed Redfriars, his eyes staring into space as if he were examining the case impartially. "May I ask you why you have come to see me?"

"Not to give you the punishment you deserve, but to compel you to announce your marriage."

"That would certainly be a surprise to my friends, some of whom expected to hear of me leading Miss Gubbs to the altar. Supposing I refuse?" he said, suavely.

"I'll within three days your marriage is not published I will undertake to make it known," Ferrars replied, angrily. "Here is a copy of the registrar's certificate which will be sufficient to assure the newspaper people of the truth. You can no longer wrong and deceive your victim; it is useless for you to lie any further. To acknowledge her as your wife and live with her before the world is the only reparation you can make for the blackguardism of your conduct."

The words caused Ferrars an effort, and he winced perceptibly as he spoke them; the man standing opposite him saw this and took the opportunity of striking a blow in return for the many that had been dealt him.

"Your interest in Stella is great; you were to have married her, I believe?"

"Ay, before you came between us."

"But supposing I relinquish my first claim—could you not—that is, some arrangement—"

Ferrars stepped forward, his lips quivering, his face blanched, his hands trembling and outstretched—"Another word and I will strangle you," he exclaimed, gasping for breath.

The supercilious smile faded from Redfriars' face, which grew pale from fear, for he saw murder looking from the eyes which glared upon him.

"Don't excite yourself," he muttered, inaudibly.

"You are a loathsome scoundrel! It's not good for an honest man to breathe the same air—it's tainted," Ferrars said, almost choked by his excitement; and no longer able to endure the presence of the man before him, he moved away. Turning round as he reached the door, he said, "You have three days to announce your marriage—three days—remember."

"Three days," repeated Redfriars, mechanically, when he was left alone, "three days and then—"

He shrugged his shoulders and dropped into an easy chair, in which he lay back, tired, anxious, depressed, but withal relieved. His self-restraint, his suppressed excitement and his physical dread told heavily upon his nervous system and left him languid and unmanly. But however feeble the condition of his body might be, his mind was intensely active, and he critically surveyed the situation. His marriage was no longer a secret, and Stella would no doubt soon proclaim herself his wife. Then his wedding a schoolmaster's daughter in private near twelve months ago would become the sensation of the hour. Many of his friends and acquaintances knew it was his intention to have married Ada, and they would now learn that he had contemplated bigamy.

The part he played in assuring Stella she was not his wife, in casting her aside, in ignoring her existence, and in striving to secure the fortune of Ada Gubbs, would be fully discussed. The world would fall to regard him in the same light as he viewed himself. He was hardly conscious of having done wrong and was wholly indifferent to the injury he had inflicted; whilst the majority of his fellows would judge him as had the man who had just quitted his presence. They would fall to look on with approval at the clever game he had played, and to feel interested in him, notwithstanding his great daring and fine ability.

The world had little sympathy with such adventures as his, especially when they failed. Men would turn from him—hypocrites, of course, who must scornfully repudiate vice that they might be thought virtuous; he would be sacrificed to conventionalty, be made a scapegoat by the respectable. Women, above all, would shun him, and the press would certainly belabor him with abuse.

It was so ridiculous to have failed, so unworthy of him just as he was on the point of success. Nothing was certain in this world save death—save death. Through that black gate many men had

escaped from exposure. He started at the thought and blamed himself for its admission to his mind. If he desired to escape he had only to go abroad, and that is what he should do at once—to-night, to-morrow—leaving all complications to settle themselves. Let others announce his marriage if they pleased, he would not.

Abroad he could enjoy freedom, blue skies, clear atmospheres, fields for wide adventure, opportunities for pleasures, changes from dull respectability, a gracious people, everything to make life worth living. He strove to feel happy at the prospect of wandering aimlessly in strange lands, but a violent intermittent pain in his head made all other emotion than misery impossible, and somehow his spirit which he sought to upraise, drooped and sank again and again.

His hands were burning, so were his temples, and his throat was dry. The room became stifling, but he had neither the energy nor the courage to venture abroad; he shrank from meeting acquaintances, he dreaded crowds, the noise of streets would in his present mood send him distracted. Yet how miserable he was alone; he felt queer at the quietness of his surroundings.

In an interval of relief from pain he dozed and saw before him vaguely and confusedly a glimpse of an Italian landscape, a long white winding road skirted by orange groves and olive woods on one side, and by shelving heights covered with terraces of vines on the other. The sky was blue and peaceful; here and there a cypress tree, black and mournful, stood against the light, topmost on the hills. The road led to a city vast and crowded with narrow crooked streets having overhanging storeys and broad balconies, with shrines dim and dusty at the corners. Beyond were noble churches dignified by time, and stately palaces of marble which the sun had warmed to amber, and in the air was the splashing of waters falling into wide basins of alabaster.

Women passed to and fro; women with figures upright and graceful, with dark eyes flashing under noble brows and white teeth seen between lips full and red as a peony; women whose brown rounded throats were encircled by strings of colored beads, whose bosoms were covered yet scarce concealed by the white muslin rising above tight velvet bodices. Amidst them walked one in black, tall and spectral, weird and sad, a blot upon the yellow sunshine; one whose face was veiled, whose figure was bowed, whose tread was noiseless as the dead; she moved as the dead amongst the living, and with a little of life's ways about her as the dead.

He longed to know who this woman was, yet dared not question her or ask others, feeling the answer would be ominous, the knowledge fatal to all future joy.

So realistic seemed, so close beside, he struggled to escape, when opening slowly his eyes he saw a form move away. He started upright and looked around, when he caught sight of Whyman's retreating figure.

"It is you," he gasped, feeling infinite relief.

"Yes, my lord; I fear I have disturbed your lordship."

"No, no. What is it?"

"That person is waiting to see your lordship."

"The woman—?"

"Yes, my lord."

Redfriars felt his heart sink with some nameless foreboding, some vague apprehension of fear. It seemed to him that the great crisis of life had arrived; that he was about to stand face to face with his destiny. He dared not avoid his visitor or seek escape from one who in him possessed the importance and power of fate. He would see her, happen what might.

"Let her come in," he said mournfully.

(TO BE CONCLUDED.)

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