

A BITTER BIRTHRIGHT.

LADY GILMORE'S TEMPTATION

BY DORA RUSSELL. Author of "Footprints in the Snow," "The Broken Seal," "The Track of the Storm," "A Strange Message," &c., &c.

[ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.] CHAPTER XXXIX.—WAITING FOR GERARD.

The next morning, the 30th of April, was a fine day. That is, the sun shone out in fitful gleams between the broken, fast drifting clouds, and as its rays stole through the blinds of May's room at the Rookery, near Maidenhead, she rose, went to the window, drew up the blind and tried to shake off the depressing effects of her bad dreams of the night before.

"I hope the wind was not so bad at sea," she thought, pitifully, for her mind still lingered on the old days and the old man who dwelt on the storm-washed coast. "Poor father," she kept thinking softly, recalling how vividly his rugged, weather-beaten features had appeared to her in her dream, and how kindly John Sumner's blue eyes had gazed at his absent child. Then her thoughts turned to Gilmore— "Gerard!" as she still always called him—and she kept musing on his strange fate.

"We should have been far happier if they had never taken him from Crasie Farm," she reflected, sadly enough; "he would have been content with me then, and not ashamed of his wife as he is now. But I must just try to make the best of it, and dress and be more like the ladies he mixes with, I suppose."

In pursuance of this resolution poor May got out her new morning gown—a delicate soft blue material trimmed with cream lace—which suited well her fair skin and light hair, and proceeded to adorn herself in it in expectation of her husband's return. Then, after breakfast, she went into the rain-washed garden, the leaves still spangled with moisture, and selected some pink hyacinths to adorn her room, placing one also near her own pretty throat. After this she ordered lunch—taking care that the viands were those that Gilmore loved—and then she waited for him, but she waited in vain.

None came, when he had said he would be back, and then the afternoon glided away, and still there was no sign of Gilmore. May was not exactly uneasy, because when he went up to town he sometimes remained a few days, but she felt that he was going to do this. But when the evening came, and then night, and he was still absent, she began to be very anxious and afraid.

And the night passed as the day had done, and then the next day, but on the third day May could bear it no longer, she therefore wrote an urgent letter to Gilmore, at his rooms in Piccadilly, telling him how uneasy she was at not having heard from him, and asking him when he received her letter to telegraph a reply to it.

She waited hour after hour for her telegram, and none came. She waited until the last of the day, and there was no letter, and then she felt sure that something must have happened to her husband. Could he be ill—or—and her heart seemed to faint within her, and her face grew deadly pale. Could he have left her for another? He had been charged of late May knew well—changed and cold—and was his end of it?

May tortured herself by these surmises and miserable doubts all through a sleepless night, and then on the fourth day of Gilmore's absence, she wrote to Mr. Whitmore, whose address she knew, and whom she knew also to be a friend of Gilmore's, asking him if he knew anything of his whereabouts.

To this letter she received a reply in the shape of a telegram from Mr. Whitmore, on the same day that she sent it to tell her that he would be at Maidenhead early the next morning. Then another sleepless night had to be borne—a night haunted by dire forebodings—and about twelve o'clock Mr. Whitmore arrived at the Rookery, and with trembling footsteps May went downstairs to hear his news.

He had none to give her! He had neither seen nor heard of Gilmore, and could not understand his disappearance. He went up to town on the night of the 29th of April, and returned on the following day, but he had not seen or heard of Gilmore. "Did he go on the 29th of April?" she asked.

"No; but he did the day before—on the 28th," she answered. "Entirely alone?" "As far as I know, yes." "What time did he return on the 28th?" "About 7:30—in time for dinner."

"And he lived here?" asked one of the detectives, looking curiously at the pretty, though grief-stricken young woman before him. "Generally—not always," answered May with a sudden blush. "But she could tell them nothing but what she had already told Mr. Whitmore. She knew of no acquaintances that he had in Maidenhead she said, as the friends he had to visit him always came down from London. Then they went to the bathhouse where Gilmore's two boats were kept. The man in charge of the boats instantly confirmed May's account regarding Lord Gilmore going out to row alone nearly every afternoon lately. He used to start about 3:30 o'clock, the boatkeeper said, and generally was back by 7. He did not go on the 29th of April.

"Were the boats ever out that day at all?" "No sir, never," replied the man. "Could Lord Gilmore have gone without your knowledge?" "No, he could not; I always keep the key of the bathhouse, and go up each morning to the Rookery to get his lordship's orders."

The detectives then decided to row up the river and inquire at the various villas and look for anything was known of the missing lord. Several people up to a certain point in the river knew a young hunch-backed man by sight, who generally was alone in his boat, and also generally wore a light blue cloth cap. But there was not being to explain or account for his mysterious disappearance, especially as he had been seen since he could possibly have been on the river.

29th of April on the 9 o'clock train" now inquired Whitmore. The stationmaster smiled. "Not in the 9, sir, but in the 11 train," he answered, "and to tell you the truth I thought his lordship was a bit on, when he came into the station to take his ticket, for he had a queer wild look altogether; but, of course, there is no mistaking him on account of his figure."

"No, of course not, and you are quite sure he went up to town in the 11 train on that night?" "As sure as I am standing here, sir," I spoke to him and said what a wild night it was, and he answered somewhat indistinctly, and that was what made me think he had taken a drop too much."

"It is very odd—he was at a dance in town that night, and he never appeared. I am really beginning to be afraid something has happened."

The stationmaster was, of course, all curiosity and sympathy, and Whitmore walked back to the Rookery, with a moody brow and an uneasy heart. He was forced to tell May what he had heard, and he could not deny that Gilmore's disappearance was, to say the least, both alarming and mysterious.

She broke into a passionate fit of tears when she heard what he had to tell her, and seemed overwhelmed with grief. "Oh! I dream that night something was following him!" she cried; "something evil. Oh! Mr. Whitmore, what shall we do?"

"Well, I think the best thing will be for me to go back to town at once, and if nothing has been heard of him at his rooms or at his clubs I think the police ought to be at once communicated with, and a regular search instituted."

"He—may have been robbed—and—" wept May, who was sobbing as if her heart would break. "We must hope for the best—please do not distress yourself so dreadfully, Mrs. May—I will telegraph to you at once after I have made the inquiries in town."

"And—the stationmaster was—quite sure he went by the 11 train, not by the 9?" "Quite sure; and he said he seemed to have been drinking. Was he quite sober when he left here?"

"Quite, quite sober; he would take nothing but a glass of beer, and I noticed he took much less than usual."

"Then, he must have been somewhere you know in this place from 9 o'clock until close on 11 when he went to the station. Does he know any of the people here?"

"I don't think he knows anyone; sometimes he goes with young men to the hotels, but very seldom; young men who come down from London."

"I had best inquire here first, then," said Whitmore; but no one had seen Lord Gilmore in Maidenhead on the night of the 29th of April, until he had gone to the Rookery to tell May this, and then started at once for town, leaving the poor young woman a prey to the most terrible anxiety. Four after hour she spent pacing her room with restless footsteps, or going to the gateway of the garden looking eagerly out for the expected telegram from Whitmore.

It came about 7 o'clock and was very disheartening. "No one had seen or heard of him in town; have communicated with the police; one of the inspectors and myself will be with you early to-morrow."

Then, when May read this, she felt her cup of woe full, and in passionate and broken-hearted accents she called on her father to come to her; and the servants listening to her wild words knew something dreadful had happened, and it began to be whispered about that the hunch-backed young lord had disappeared, and many strange surmises were made.

"He's just got tired of her and run away with some one else," suggested the woman. "He was a wild young fellow, and was probably drunk when he got into the train, and some scoundrel has knocked him on the head for the sake of his watch and purse," said the men.

"He must have been somewhere from 9 to 11 o'clock," said the police; but the remarks made no one any wiser. Gilmore had left the Rookery about a quarter to 9 o'clock on April 29, and nothing more could be heard of him again in Maidenhead until he appeared at the station at about five minutes to 11 o'clock. Where he had been in the interval no one could find out; after he entered the train he was never seen more.

CHAPTER XL.—JUAN'S SONG. The next day the London detectives arrived at Maidenhead, but their inquiries elicited nothing further. They questioned May minutely regarding Gilmore's habits, and learned from her that nearly every afternoon lately he had rowed in his boat alone up the river. "Did he go on the 29th of April?" she asked.

"No; but he did the day before—on the 28th," she answered. "Entirely alone?" "As far as I know, yes." "What time did he return on the 28th?" "About 7:30—in time for dinner."

line still—suppose we row in and ask him if he knows the hunchbacked lord by sight?" They followed this suggestion, and a few minutes later returned to the stockade where Juan was sitting, fishing rod in hand, with his mandolin lying on one of the prows of the stockade beside him. Juan smiled politely as they approached, laid down his rod, and went to the landing stage to receive them.

They addressed him in English, but Juan only shook his head, grinned at his white teeth, and gave them to understand that he knew no English. Then Mr. Whitmore tried him in French, but again Juan shook his head, and began to tell them volubly in Spanish that that language was his native and only tongue.

Neither Mr. Whitmore nor the detectives understood Spanish, and therefore it seemed hopeless to further question Juan; Mr. Whitmore pointed to Juan's mandolin, and the black-robed, swarthy rascal instantly accepted this as an invitation to perform before them.

He took up his position at an instrument, to which long, and varied colored narrow ribbons of deep rich hues were attached, and having hung the ribbons over his shoulder, began to troll forth in his full melodious voice some love ditty of his romantic land.

His song was well worth listening to, and the whole appearance of the man was so picturesque and striking that Mr. Whitmore considered the performance quite worth the shilling which he hung at Juan's feet, who picked it up, grinned and took off his hat pointed hat and seemed perfectly satisfied with the impression he had made.

"He's a fine fellow," said Whitmore as they rowed again into the open, "but he looks a bit of a scamp; I wonder who he belongs to?" "Probably to some Spanish merchant who is settled in town," answered one of the detectives; "these people take the same places down the river for the summer months."

"Most likely," answered Whitmore carelessly, and then the subject was dropped; and the little river-side villa where Gerard, Lord Gilmore, had sat so often of late soon faded from their view.

And all their researches and inquiries proved as vain as this row up the river. Nothing of the kind was known of him by sight, but no one knew anything about his movements on the 29th of April, the day he disappeared, except Mrs. May and the servants of the Rookery, and the stationmaster. Nothing would shake the stationmaster in the statement which he had made, that he had seen and spoken to Lord Gilmore on the evening of the 29th of April, at a few minutes before 11 o'clock, and that he had seen him enter the train.

"If he left in the train, then it is no use looking for him at Maidenhead," the detective decided, and therefore he quit the place, and a search along the whole length of the river from Maidenhead to town was at once instituted.

In the meanwhile poor May, unable any longer to endure the misery of her position, turned in her loneliness and wretchedness to the father whom she had forsaken. To the intense surprise of John Sumners, therefore, about a fortnight after the disappearance of Gilmore, the rural postman one morning delivered at his house a letter in his daughter's handwriting.

John's rugged brow face flushed scarlet the moment his eyes fell upon it, and then he drew out his horn spectacles and having with trembling hands adjusted them, began to read the piteous, heart-broken words.

"My dearest father: Perhaps you will be too angry with me to read this, yet if you knew all the misery and trouble I am in, I think you would not be. I know I behaved very badly in leaving you as I did, but Gerard—my poor, poor Gerard—gave me no choice. We were engaged to be married when Gerard left London, and then when he became Lord Gilmore, he wrote me to meet him in secret, and said he would keep his promise and marry me, but that our marriage must be kept a secret from every one for the present. I prayed very hard to tell you, but he would not consent, and at last I gave in. We were married in London at a church all right, and then at another church, where Gerard had been brought up a Roman Catholic. I loved him very dearly, dear father, and we were very happy, though I fretted about you, and about people not knowing that we were married. But the dreadful part of my news is yet to come. A fortnight ago—on the 29th of April—Gerard went to a dance with a friend of his intended to give on that night. I forgot to tell you that he has bought a house for me down here, and that he generally lives here, but he has rooms in London where he stays when he goes there. Dear father, he started in time to go to the dance, but he never returned or heard of him again! All sorts of cruel things are said about his disappearance because people do not know that we are really married, and some think he has just run away and left me. But I do not think this because he has a good heart—I think something dreadful has happened to him, and some I am sure, will you forgive me and come to me in my great, great trouble? I will not write any more now for I am broken down with grief; but hoping soon to hear from you and see you, I remain your affectionate daughter, May."

John Sumner read this sorrowful letter twice, and then sat down on his knees in solemn heartfelt prayer. It had been more bitter than death to him, the thought that his child was living a life of shame, and the knowledge of her marriage, swept a great black cloud from his soul. Long he knelt there, pouring forth in unuttered language his thankfulness and gratitude, praying as he had sometimes prayed when in great danger on the deep; when the mighty waves had opened as if to swallow him and his small craft, and yet he who made the sea and the wonders thereof had brought him safe to shore.

When presently he rose from his knees and began to set his house in order, like a man going on a long journey, setting all his accounts, and drawing five hundred pounds from his bank, so as to have funds in hand to help his daughter. And having made all these arrangements he left Scarley without a word of farewell or boasting. He knew very well what had been said about May, but it was not the little gossip that hurt at him to the soul. He was a God-fearing man with his face turned heavenwards, and the thought that his prayers had been answered, that his child had been given back to him was too solemn for vain words.

Two days later poor, unhappy May, who was beginning to recover cold looks from those around her—from those who had eaten her bread and belonged to her household, because it was believed that the young lord who had protected her was either dead or had fled from her—two days later then after she had written to her father, as she sat and sipped at her tea, she heard the door open from the hall she heard the door open, and ever eagerly looking out for news she sprang to her feet and listened.

And she heard a familiar voice—the voice of her father—into the hall and closed him tightly in her arms. "Father! father!" she cried, with her cheek against his rugged one. John Sumners was a man of few words, and for a minute or so he did not speak, though his lips quivered as if about to do so. Then, with his deep voice broken with emotion, he said, solemnly: "Thank God, my girl; thank God, I have found thee safe."

CHAPTER XL.—A HAUNTING SHADOW. Again we must turn to the night of the 29th of April, when in the darkness and the storm, Lord Gilmore disappeared. He was seen no more. The morning after this night Nancy rose pale, oppressed and with the shadow of coming ill lying heavy on her heart. She was afraid to face her husband—to go into Hugh Gilmore's dressing room after the terrible words she had heard him murmur in his sleep; and after seeing the terrible expression of his face as he stole into his room in the midnight hours.

The nurse came for the child and she went down to breakfast, and after waiting till past 10 o'clock, she at last reluctantly, slowly, went up stairs again, and passing through her own room rapped at Hugh Gilmore's door. Hearing something like a permission to enter, she went in, only to start back shocked and terrified. Hugh Gilmore was in bed, and his face looked haggard and even ghastly, and he had evidently been drinking heavily.

"Are you ill, Hugh?" faltered Nancy. "He" answered, with a drunken laugh, "I've got brain fever—brain fever—feel how it burns its coils on fire!" "Shall I bathe it for you?" asked Nancy, trembling.

"No, but reach the brandy—that's a good girl; there's nothing like drink; it drowns it, drowns every thing."

"Oh! don't take any more, Hugh," she prayed. "Give me it; I insist!" he shouted, starting up; but when Nancy went to the bottle of brandy which had been standing in his room she found it was empty.

But he ordered her to ring the bell for a hundred of pennies to drink; and he drank for an hour, and then he lay on his back, and by night was in a raving fever. But the pale young wife who tried to control him allowed no one else to enter his room, and dare not send for a physician. Strange words broke from his lips; a haunting shadow of horror seemed ever to pursue him; and again and again he muttered and spoke in a hoarse, broken voice the words she had heard last night.

"Don't do it unless you are sure he is dead; don't put him in alive!" "All night Nancy sat up with him, and towards morning he grew very prostrate. He then became a little calmer, and at last fell into a heavy sleep, from which he awoke about 11 o'clock the next day—pale, exhausted and very ill; but sober. He lay still without speaking for some time, and Nancy noticed that his eyes fell when they met hers, and he moved uneasily. Presently he said: "I've made a tremendous fool of myself, I am afraid, Nancy; but some men go mad when they drink the club and drink far more than was good for me, and have been very near brain fever or delirium tremens I believe—and I dare say have been going on in a very absurd way."

"But you are better now, Hugh," answered Nancy, soothingly. "I feel less enough, I can tell you; I hope you did not get any one else see me make an ass of myself!" "I have been with you all the time Hugh—no one else."

"That's all right then; now I'll try to get to sleep again."

But he did not easily recover, and was in bed more than a week after the stormy night of the 29th of April, when he had returned home in such a terrible state. All this time Nancy nursed him, and gave out in the household that he was laid up with a very severe cold, and that he could not bear to be disturbed. He asked for the newspapers and his letters, and one morning before he was awake, Nancy having carried up the morning papers for him, sat down to read them, and then he roused himself and was ready for his breakfast.

And she had not read long before a paragraph caught her eyes, which, as she read and re-read it, seemed absolutely to swim before her. It was headed "The Missing Lord," and detailed the strange facts that we already know. How Lord Gilmore had mysteriously disappeared, and had been last seen by the stationmaster at Maidenhead at five minutes before 11 o'clock on the night of the 29th of April. "The 29th of April," Nancy read with breath, and mentally counted back the last seven days. As she did so a sharp physical pain darted through her heart, and she had the greatest difficulty in restraining the cry that nearly escaped her white lips. That was the night Hugh returned in the midnight hours with the fixed look of horror on his face; the night when he had begun to drink—what could it all mean?

She grew faint and cold, and grasped the chair on which she was sitting for support. No one knew as well as she did how Hugh Gilmore had hated his elder brother with a deadly hatred that never grew less. She had indeed ceased to mention the elder brother's name, as she saw it was but a vain thing to attempt to reconcile them. And that he should have disappeared—Gerard—killed Nancy's heart with the first apprehensions.

Presently she rose and tottered from the room, giving one look of fear, of terror, at the face of the sleeping man lying on the bed, as she went out. She was thankful to escape, and going into her pretty drawing-room the door of which she had opened to be open as she passed it, she sat down there and covered her face with her hands.

Long she sat, the most terrible thoughts crowding through her mind. Then a kind of piteous cry burst from her quivering lips. "For baby's sake—for baby's sake," she repeated, rocking herself to and fro. Yes, for the child's sake, she was telling herself, she must hide in her own heart the haunting shadows that ever after would pursue her footsteps. She must keep her fears hidden from Hugh, from everyone, if Gerard were dead Hugh would not know, and she would be spared the thought of a father's shudders at the thought.

About half an hour later she heard Hugh's bell ring, and trembling still in every limb she crept up stairs and found him sitting up in bed, reading her this terrible shock.

"Well," he said, as she entered the room, "there's some news about our family in this paper I see—my worthy older brother has run away!" He said this in a bitter, mocking tone, and it seemed impossible to Nancy to answer him; and Hugh Gilmore looking suddenly and suspiciously at her saw the pallor of her face.

"Have you seen it?" he asked quickly. "I saw Gilmore was missing," answered Nancy with difficulty. Hugh Gilmore gave a harsh, forced laugh. "Missing with some lady-love, no doubt!" he said, scornfully. "I heard there was a girl he lived with down the river somewhere; no doubt he has got tired of her and has run away—he'll cast up."

Nancy said nothing more. She moved about the room and rang for Hugh's breakfast, and she thought by the face of the man servant who carried it in that he had heard the news, too. It had already, indeed, been discussed downstairs and freely commented on. If Gerard, Lord Gilmore, were dead, then Hugh Gilmore was the next heir, they all said, and they respected the next heir accordingly.

There were many versions of course of the same story, but the most generally believed one was that the unfortunate young hunch-backed lord had been intoxicated when he entered the train, and had been murdered for his money while in a state of semi-insensibility. What had become of his body no one could tell, but the whole line of railway was being searched, and it was proposed to offer a large reward for its recovery.

It naturally was greatly talked of. Hugh Gilmore had of course been well known in society as Lord Gilmore, and the strange events which had deprived him of the title were also well known. It was strange if it should so soon go back to him, people said; therefore the efforts of the police were followed with the keenest interest. Only Hugh Gilmore affected utter indifference about it, and would swing his shoulders when it was mentioned to him.

"He will cast up, you will see," he said, when he reappeared after his illness at his clubs, and some of his friends began talking to him of his brother's strange disappearance; and he said the same to Nancy at home, the same to his mother when some rumor having reached her ears about her eldest son, Lady Gilmore wrote to Hugh to make inquiries.

"But during all these days the most miserable anxiety hung over Nancy's heart, and told so visibly on her appearance, that when her old friend, Maj. Ernie, called one afternoon to see her, he felt absolutely shocked. She was pale, with violet rims round her heavy eyes, in which there was a strange new look of fear.

"Have you been ill?" asked Ernie with real concern. "I've not been feeling well," I got nervous about the afternoon to see her without looking at his face, answered Nancy. "I am so sorry; you ought to go down and stay with Miss Gifford for change at Gateford. She told me that I was to be sure to call on you, and also to be sure to ask to see your little son."

"Poor little baby!" said Nancy, with tremulous lips. "High little baby, I think," smiled Ernie.

Nancy sighed and Ernie could not understand how even the baby now failed apparently to make Nancy's heart more light.

"And this story about your brother-in-law," he said presently. "How much of it is true?" And he noticed that Nancy grew paler as he spoke. "I know nothing but what I have seen in the papers," she answered. "My husband was ill at the time when Lord Gilmore is said to have disappeared, and I was nursing him, and we heard nothing of it for days—Hugh says he is sure to cast up again."

"The police think very seriously of the case, I believe."

"It certainly does seem most strange. What does Miss Gifford think about it?" "Oh, Miss Gifford thinks it is only a freak—that Lord Gilmore has perhaps run away with some one."

"Well, we shall know soon, I suppose," said Nancy nervously. "Time clears up most of things," answered Ernie. "But you must let me see her boy, as Miss Gifford calls your son, or I dare not face the old lady."

Nancy smiled and went out of the room to fetch her baby, and returned with him in her arms. A handsome little fellow this, who peeped at his small hand and undragged one of Maj. Ernie's brown fingers, who stooped down and kissed the little fist.

"He looks remarkably well; he is certainly a lucky little chappie," said Ernie, smiling. "Who knows?" answered Nancy. "Who can tell?" And she sighed, and tenderly kissed the baby's face.

They were still talking of him, when another visitor was announced, and to Nancy's great surprise Father Hayward was ushered into the drawing-room. The good priest looked very serious, and having shaken hands with Nancy and Maj. Ernie, he asked Nancy if her husband was at home.

"I have some strange news for him," he said gravely. "Not about—Gerard?" asked Nancy, with unmistakable agitation. "Yes, about Lord Gilmore," answered Father Hayward.

"Have you found him, then?" almost gasped Nancy. "Unhappily not—but can I see Mr. Gifford?"

With trembling hands Nancy rang the bell, and inquired of the servant if her husband was at home. The footman thought not, but went to see, and a few moments later returned to the drawing room and said Mr. Gifford was out.

"Then can I speak to you?" said the priest. "Yes—of course," faltered Nancy. Upon this Maj. Ernie took his leave, and the nurse was sent for to take the baby; and Nancy found herself alone with Father Hayward.

"We had a strange visitor at Wrothley yesterday," he began. "But will you not sit down, Mrs. Gifford? You have grown so pale."

Then Nancy sat down, and with a white face and beating heart listened to the priest's news. [TO BE CONTINUED.]

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