

End of the Chapter.

KENYON MEREDITH twisted round several times on his revolving chair, and, with an impatient movement of the hand, said:

"Ask Miss Gerard to come in here." The frown left his face as a girl entered—a girl who was unknown to him save by name.

"I don't know why it is," she said, without preface, "but mother can know no peace till she has seen you. She knew your father, you know," with a queer, ironical smile. "How bored you must be with people who trade on that past acquaintance to make you do things you hate!"

"Not at all!" he hastened to assure her, letting his quick, appreciative eye roam from the soft curve of her uplifted chin to her little patent-clad toes, that were tracing patterns on the carpet. "Only, you see, I no longer practice."

"A triviality of that sort means nothing to mother," she averred. And he laughed—a very attractive, pleasant laugh—and wondered why she roused in him interest; why he kept silence that he might hear her voice; why he felt compelled to seek her glance, that glance that wandered rather haughtily over his head. She ought not to attract him, he told himself, and yet she did. Her manner was very distant, her mouth grave, and if her eyes had a lurking smile, it was, he felt sure, an habitual one, born of gay good humor—of sweet temper.

"Mother has made up her mind to see you," she continued, "and the fact that you no longer visit or receive patients only makes her more determined. Will you go to her? She sent me, instead of writing you a note."

Meredith inwardly complimented Mrs. Gerard upon her choice of a messenger. Aloud, he merely said: "It will give me great pleasure," and rose as she did, furtively marking the mixture of question and incredulity in her straight, raised eyebrows.

She thanked him gravely, indifferently, was evidently quite unconscious of the warm pressure of his handclasp, and, with a slight bow, left him. And that is how they first met. Yesterday she was but a name to him; he was hardly aware of her existence. To-day—in ten minutes—the world, in some inexplicable way, had changed for him. The dull, blue glasses through which he was accustomed to look upon it were snatched from his eyes, snatched by a soft, tender hand, that replaced them, all unconsciously, with those which were rose-hued.

With a light laugh, he pushed aside the papers on his desk, and fell to pacing the room restlessly. Once he stopped before a mirror, studying in it his reflection. He was neither young nor good-looking; but his face was kind, open and full of character. It bore traces of some suffering, too, and the lines about his clean-shaven mouth gave evidence of great determination, that matched a certain expression sometimes to be seen in his eyes.

And when he had spent more than an hour in thought, he put on his hat, and paid his promised visit to Mrs. Gerard, with promptitude which she considered very flattering.

"Mother is not really ill." There was no question in the girl's tone. She was standing before Meredith, her eyes fixed searchingly on his; and they were both occupying the half-yard of Mrs. Gerard's balcony which was not covered with flower boxes.

"No, not really," he replied unguardedly, watching the little soft rings of hair as they were lifted from her forehead by the light night wind.

"Then why have you come here every day for five weeks?" It was a question he was not prepared to answer off hand, and so took refuge in temporary silence.

"It pleases her," he said at last. "She—she—has confidence in me; and it enables me to see you, too—sometimes."

"Sometimes?" she queried, and smiled—one of her rare, sweet smiles—full in his eyes. He thrust his hands into his pockets, over-riding a desire to draw her into his arms. And his voice sounded cold when he spoke again, because of the restraint he was putting on himself.

"Your life cannot be a happy one, spent up in this great house, in everlasting attendance upon—"

"No, it is not happy; but that cannot be helped."

"I differ with you. It can—it

should. If—you will let it be so—it shall!"

"Hark! That is mother calling. You are very good. Good-night." She gave him both her hands with the utmost frankness, smiled again into his face, as a fearless child might, not as a woman would, and left him, piqued, baffled, with half-angry eyes, frowning down upon an innocent geranium.

"I might be her father!" he reflected, walking slowly home. "She is more than lovely, but she is an icicle. She has no idea of the meaning of love; but she shall learn, and I will teach her. She is a statue now, but she shall come to life beneath my influences, my touch!"

Even as he made this half-fierce resolution some memory came to him that drove the color from his face. With an impatient gesture he turned into his own house, determinedly thrusting aside any disturbing thoughts.

"You are not unhappy now?" As Meredith asked the question he shipped his scull, bent a little forward and tried to get the better of the gathering gloom and the great brim of her hat in an endeavor to meet her eyes.

The river was thronged, there was an incessant busy hum of voices; now and then some pleasure-seekers, whose only idea of enjoyment was to make a great noise, cleft the air with shouts and songs. But Marion Gerard and her companion were deaf and blind to all about them.

She did not answer—she was a woman of so few words—only her mouth and eyes smiled together. And she let him take one of her hands and pull off the loose glove, and rest his lips on the veins that crossed in a blue V at her wrist, and then lingering on each separate finger. Her eyes dwelt fondly on his dark, bent head, and a thrill of passionate tenderness swept over her, but she gave no sign. And when they had landed, and he was walking by her side between two great hedges of syringa, he said again, half impatiently:

"You are not unhappy now?"

"Why ask—when you know?" "Because I like you to tell me; because I can't read your thoughts through the back of a straw hat; because you say so little that every word is valuable. You are cold as ice—you sleep—you dream! Will you never wake to life—to warmth—to tenderness—for me?"

The words left his lips rather rapidly, in unconsidered impulse, while a wave of joyous exultation passed over him at the mute, unexpected, characteristic answer—two soft, warm arms wound round his neck, two shy, sweet lips held gladly, willingly, up to his.

"You are awake—at last?" he said, hardly above his breath, and crushed his mouth on hers in passionate thirst.

That night, when Meredith had gone, and Marion Gerard stood smiling down upon the restless river, a woman swept her skirts with a little decisive rustle over the trim lawn, and laid a gentle hand on the girl's arm.

"You are a mere child," she said, without warning, "with your old-world notions and your unfashionable ideas of life in general, and your mother is an idiot—always was! That is why I, for your own good, mean to speak. I am your aunt, anyhow, and—"

"What have I done?" the girl questioned in surprise.

"Not much—yet. It's what you may do. I haven't the remotest idea how Kenyon Meredith took up the part of 'tame cat' about your house, only I may as well tell you, before matters go any farther, that his wife is alive. They have been separated for 20 years, but—she lives. Marion, I am telling you—"

"For my good," the other interrupted, then paused, while her lips grew white and her eyes wide and troubled. "Don't you know people hate being told things for their good?" and turned away, blindly, gropingly, with a little despairing gesture that forbade further speech on her aunt's part.

"Is it true?"

The simple words left the girl's lips in a sort of panting whisper, next day, as she stood on the opposite side of his library table, facing Meredith.

"My dear child, I thought you were above listening to the petty gossip of—"

"Is it true?"

He came to her side, and held her forcibly to him before he answered. "Yes, but—"

"Let me go—"

"Not till you have heard me."

So she made no further struggle to escape his hold, but leant wearily against his arm while he spoke.

His voice was very low and persuasive. His explanation might have been convincing to other ears, but she was shutting out from hers the insidious, pleading tones, striving with all her might to steel herself against him. And when he was silent she unlaced his fingers determinate-

ly from about her wrists, and went a little distance from him.

"I don't believe you have been listening—that you have heard a word," he declared, discontentedly, following her.

"I have tried not. My only safeguard lies in being deaf to every sound of your voice. Ah!" turning suddenly toward him, and fixing her dry, miserable eyes on his, "what made you do it? Why could you not have left me in peace—in—"

"Not happiness," he said, swiftly, across her words.

"Not? You are remembering that I was foolish enough to resent a little dull monotony. What is that compared to the weariness of all the empty years to come? Were there no other women—women whose hearts have passed through so many storms that they have lost the power of feeling keenly—upon whom you could practice your sophistries? Were there not—"

"It was because you were so unlike all other women I had ever known that I was first attracted to you. It was because in your half-haughty indifference you appeared to me so alluringly unassailable that the desire grew within me to be he who should pierce the armor of your chilly reserve till it lay broken and useless at your feet. It was because I knew your heart to be untouched by passion that I longed to stir within it thoughts of love. It was because you were so sweet, so true, so pure, so innocent, that—"

"For your sport you have laid waste my whole life." The words, gently spoken, shamed him as no bitter reproach could have done.

"At first," he admitted, the slow color rising to and then receding from his face, "in wanton carelessness I played a game so familiar to me, only on different lines. And then it became earnest; so desperately, painfully earnest! I ought to have drawn back, but I could not! It is so seldom a man resists his inclinations! And then I forgot everything; at least I shut out remembrance. For the first time I grew ashamed of my past, and dreamed of a future, at your side, when I should be raised by the influence of your pure love to your level—ah! not—as she shook her head sadly—"in the world's eyes, perhaps, because it never can or will understand; but in yours, in mine, away, apart from everyone!"

He went on vehemently, noting the growing pallor of her cheeks. "I deserve every reproach from you. I—"

"But that is the worst of it," she interrupted, coming nearer to him and resting her cold hands half absently on his breast. "I cannot reproach you—I don't want to. Don't you see that it is an awful battle between my love for you and my determination to put you out of my life altogether? And I am so fearful lest it should be a one-sided fight—lest the victory should lie with the one it should not. Can't you understand? I have no heart, no mind, that is not dominated by you. There is only just the certainty that in that future of which you speak, you, forgetting that you had dragged me down, would learn to despise me, too! That alone goads my spirit to right doing. To all else I am blinded by my love—that love which makes all you say and do seem good in my eyes."

"I was so proud to be no longer myself, but only yours; now I know I must be forever—no one's! And I may live," her voice rising to a little unconscious wail, "50 more years!"

He pressed her face down on his heart, that he might not see the agony in her eyes.

"What, then, do you mean to do?" he asked. "To—leave you now—at once. Don't," with a light laugh that had a sob in it, "tempt me to stay!" There was something in her voice which told him argument would be useless, and with a hopeless sigh he let his arms fall to his sides and left her free.

There was dead silence, save for the ticking of the clock, which sounded unusually loud. He felt, rather than saw, that she reached the door. It opened, then closed—and still she was not gone. She was coming toward him. She had not strength to go after all, he thought, while a wild, delirious joy, that sent the blood rushing to his head and robbed him of sight and hearing, took possession of him.

"You have come back?" he said, breathlessly, and held out to her both his hands.

"Dear," she answered, gravely, "don't make—another woman—suffer as—"

The rest of the sentence died away in a whisper. Through the blind tangle of his mind, the booming in his ears, there came the slow, departing rustle of her gown, the click of the latch, the soft closing of the door.

His face contracted painfully, and then fell forward on his arms, flung down in bitter, hopeless despair upon the windowsill.—Clement Scott's Free Lance.

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