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THE UNFAITHFUL GUARDIAN.

CONTINUED.

"AND I," he said, striving to speak calmly, "are my feelings nothing? Can I go to that young girl with a lie in my mouth?—can I go through my whole life acting a lie?"

"Your feelings may change—"

"Anything but that—upon that theme you shall not touch!"

Mr. James clenched his hand over the table, but his face did not change.

"We will not argue the point," he said, "the question is a simple one—a father calls upon his son to aid him, will he consent or refuse?"

"But I will not have the ruin of that poor girl's happiness upon my soul!" he said.

"There is no reason why you should—my word for it, she is in love with you already."

The words jarred on his listener's ear like sounds of revelry in the midst of a funeral requiem.

"But there is time enough for this marriage—a year hence—"

"There is not a day to be lost—the wedding must take place at once. It may be as private as you like—a secret marriage would perhaps be best on all accounts. You will leave here at once—go to South America for a year or so, by the time you return you will find a charming bride awaiting you."

"I will not make that child wretched." He replied.

"You are mad! She loves you already—before she ever saw you she had some girlish dream, of which you were the hero. Enough—your answer—no hesitation—your answer?"

"I will marry her."

"At once?"

"At once—what matters it?—when and how you will? Are you satisfied? Then leave me, in heaven's name leave me!"

Mr. James looked at him for a moment—read the truth of his resolve in his very desperation—then went quietly away, gliding like a shadow through the moonlit halls.

CHAPTER VIII

"Nellie is there—go in."

Walter Sears made no reply, but opening the door noiselessly, entered the room where Mr. James had left the young girl, after an interview which lasted for several hours.

She was seated at the farther end of the apartment, her cheeks looking paler from its contrast with the crimson cushions of the chair against which she leaned, and trembling still from the surprise and agitation which that conversation had caused her. She looked up, at the sound of William's footsteps, but her shy, frightened eyes sank again, without even glancing at his face, while a bright, feverish crimson mounted into her cheeks.

He sat down by her side, and gently took the little hand that lay quivering upon the arm of her chair, took it with nothing of passion, but kindly as a brother might have done.

"Nellie," he said, "Nellie!"

She bowed her fair head in token that she heard his voice, but made no effort to reply.

"Is it true what they have told me?—are you willing to become my wife?"

She felt that he was pausing for a response, and while the color rushed in a torrent to her temples, and her eyes glanced up for an instant like those of a startled fawn, she strove to speak:

"Yes, Mr. James—I—he has told me."

"I know, Nellie; but you—do your own feelings revolt at the idea?"

"Spare me, Mr. Sears," she said, pitifully; "I am such a child, do spare me!"

"I do not mean to frighten you, but I must know that this thing is not done against your will."

"No, no—it is best," he says, then she remembered the instructions which she had just received, and paused abruptly, without speaking her guardian's name.

"You are very young, Nellie, your heart has scarcely yet spoken; but, tell me, is

there any other whom you have fancied might one day be dear to you?"

"No one," she said; then her thoughts went back to her childish days, and that noble youth who had been her playmate and constant friend. But she believed that the affection that had grown up between them was such as a sister might have given to a brother, and only marveled that the thought of him caused her a strange pang which she could not comprehend.

"You know that Mr. James deems it expedient that we should be married at once—did he not tell you so?" continued William.

"I believe—yes."

"Then, I shall leave you to your books and your quiet life which I have so unexpectedly troubled with my presence."

"You have not troubled me," Nellie said, in a firmer voice, "I am glad—"

"And you do not grieve over this hasty wedding, so strange, so improbable? When I am gone you will not be pained to remember that I am your husband?"

"No, I am so young, Mr. Sears—I do not know how to answer, but I know that I can trust my guardian."

William shuddered at that name—he could not tell if her young heart revolted at the idea of this union, or if it was only the timidity of her age. Then he remembered Mr. James' words—"My fate is in your hands, ruin or success depends upon your decision!" That man was his father—oh, God! his father! He called upon his son to save him—he dared not refuse—there was his pledge to his dying mother!

"And you will not learn to dread my coming back—for I shall return some day, Nellie."

She raised her eyes to his face, those eyes from whence all the truth of childhood looked.

"You will be my husband; I shall never dread your return, but will trust and believe in you as I have always believed in my guardian."

"Then I will tell him that you consent to this—at once as he wishes?"

"At once—now?"

"Are you frightened, Nellie?"

"No, no, not that! It is so sudden—it takes my breath away! Don't misunderstand me, Mr. Sears, I do not dislike you—I am not afraid—I would do anything to make you happy—to gratify my guardian."

"I will come back—stay here, Nellie."

He went out to the room where he knew Mr. James awaited him.

"It is settled," he said, in a hoarse, abrupt voice. "Are you satisfied?"

"But the ceremony must not be delayed—to-night—this very hour all must be irrevocably arranged," answered Mr. James.

"Do what you will—am I not in your hands? As for that child—well, well—if misery come to her, may God pardon you, it will have been your work."

"Never mind, William, you are agitated—there is nothing so terrible in all this."

"We will drive into the city—there is no train for several hours, I know a minister whom we can trust—the thing will soon be settled."

"Settled!" William repeated the word in mingled bewilderment and horror.—"Settled—and the future—the years beyond—we are young—who knows when this suffering will cease?"

"As you say, there is no time for all these fancies," Mr. James replied. "Return to the fair trembler, who in her heart is both frightened and overjoyed at the romance—I will call you when the carriage is ready."

Sears stood where Mr. James left him.—As he stood there, Catharine's image came out from the past and stationed itself beside him! That thought was madness—he could not endure the recurrence of those memories! But soon he was aroused—that man came back, placid and smiling above the dark abyss of his own thoughts.

"Ungallant bridegroom—but come along! The carriage is waiting, and Nellie is in it; I have ordered a horse for you, because I don't want your face and wild manner to frighten the girl into the belief that she is taking a maniac for a husband."

Sears followed him out, mounted his horse and rode down the avenue after the carriage. Their departure occasioned, of course, no surprise among the inmates of the house, and so they went away, those two, going on to their fate.

They were in the city at last—passing through the less frequented streets until the carriage stopped before the house which Mr. James had indicated. William mechanically checked his horse, dismounted

and followed the guardian and his helpless charge up the steps.

They waited in the dimly-lighted room into which they had been shown, while Mr. James sought the clergyman to explain, as seemed best to him, the circumstances of the case.

Nellie had seated herself in a darkened corner, awed and trembling from vague emotions and fears. William made no effort to comfort her—did not even approach her chair, but paced up and down the room unable to remain quiet for a single instant. Once the girl heard him murmur some broken syllables, but she was too much confused to hear or give them much heed. So the moments passed, and it was not until they heard steps upon the stairs that either moved. With a quick impulse William sprang to Nellie's side and seized her hand in a convulsive grasp.

"Whatever comes, promise me that you will believe I have acted for the best—that you will believe and pardon me?"

"I promise," she said, more terrified and bewildered than ever by those strange words, whose memory would recur to her one day in that shrouded, mysterious future.

The door opened, and Mr. James stood upon the threshold motioning them to follow him. William still held Nellie's hand, and led her up the staircase into a chamber where was seated the yielding clergyman.

So they were married, those two young beings, Mr. James looking calmly on, and the faithful servant, who had been summoned from below, too much accustomed to such sights even for astonishment.

Nellie tried to swallow a few drops of the wine they offered her, but her hand shook so that she could not hold the glass, and William motioned his sternly away without a word.

"We must go back now," Mr. James said. "Come with me for a moment," he continued, to the clergyman, "there is one thing I must say to you."

When they had gone out, William returned to Nellie's side, from whence he had risen at Mr. James' words.

"I am going to leave you now—think of me kindly, Nellie, do not reproach me."

"I shall remember that you are my husband," was her reply.

How the word jarred upon William's ear, but he was not yet sufficiently aroused from the sort of apathy which had been upon him for weeks, to feel as he would afterward all the bitterness and despair there was in that holy name.

He took her hands between his own—looked pityingly into her clear eyes, but uttered no expression of tenderness, and imprinted no farewell kiss upon her brow.

"Farewell," she murmured, and there was a dreary sound in the word which struck painfully on her heart.

He moved toward the door—his hand was upon the lock—again he returned to her side.

"You will remember what you have said—years hence—we cannot tell what may happen—you will remember and pardon!"

"I will—indeed I will!"

In the hall Sears met Mr. James.

"Take her home," he said, "take her home."

"But you—where are you going?"

"Anywhere, only to be away from here!"

Mr. James caught him by the arm, started at the wild look in his eyes.

"Stop, William, you must not rush off in this mad way—what do you intend to do?—we must arrange everything."

"You have arranged everything already—God knows you might be satisfied now—let me go! You will hear from me—I will let you know where to send if you want me—only let me go."

He freed himself from the other's grasp and hurried on down stairs, out of the house, and rushed like a frantic man through the streets.

Mr. James entered the room where the weeping Nellie awaited his return.

"Come, child," he said, in the gentle tone which his voice always took when he addressed her, "we will go home now."

He sat down by her, allowed her to lean her aching head upon his shoulder, and weep until her agitation had calmed itself. She looked up at length and wiped away her tears, striving to exercise that self-control which the worldly man had always impressed upon her as the one great necessity in the formation of her character.

"I am ready now," she said; "he is gone?"

"William?—yes! You will be calmer

to-morrow and better able to think. You are a good girl, my ward; one day you will be a happy wife."

"I have obeyed your wishes, and that is happiness enough—you have been my father and my friend."

He led her away, and in the calm repose of that moonlight evening they drove back to the lonely house which had been the witness of so many varying scenes, but where Nellie would find no more the perfect rest and peace which had made her early years so beautiful.

For hours William Sears wandered aimlessly through the streets, dwelling upon a single thought which had fired up amid the leaden weight upon his brain. For the first time he realized all that he had taken upon himself—the strife and wild contention had dispelled the apathetic languor which had been so long upon his soul, and he grew mad again beneath the harrowing agony which came back.

At length he found himself near the hotel to which he and Mr. James had driven upon their arrival. He went in, was shown to a room, and sat there through the whole night, struggling against the frenzy which seemed rending his very being.

One idea came up palpable and strong; he must see Catharine once more, it might be wrong, wicked, he knew not, cared not—he must find her once again! After that it mattered nothing to him what came—death must be near—no human frame could long endure the anguish which fevered his veins.

When morning came he went out, made preparations for his departure; all with an outward calmness, but still he had only one thought—Catharine's name rose continually to his lips, and many times he was conscious of murmuring it aloud, but still had no power to check the utterance.

The sunset of that day William Sears watched out upon the broad ocean—watched the gorgeous colors brighten and then fade from the west, burning their gold out against the pallid sky, as every earthly hope had burned its glory to ashes upon his heart.

One thing he had refused to do—he would not go to South America as his father had arranged. He turned stubbornly back upon his old path of travel, hoping perhaps to gather some stray grains of gold from the heavy soil of the past, or more likely from a vague desire to learn something of the woman he still loved, but must forever avoid.

They were on shore at last, and he was journeying through beautiful Normandy on to Paris. When he reached the city he did not intend to see Catharine, but could not resist a wild impulse to inquire about her. He drove to the house where he had caught the sole glimpse of paradise this world had offered him. He was out of the carriage almost before it stopped, and rushed up to the old concierge who stood in the entrance when the man recognized his face, he called out,

"Madame is gone."

"Where, where?"

Really he did not know!

William could not breathe in Paris! In another hour his passport was signed and he speeding on in that aimless journey. For two days and nights he did not sleep, scarce tasted a morsel; a burning thirst consumed him which no draught could allay, but the very sight of food was sickeningly loathsome. He exchanged railway carriages for the diligence, but hardly noticed the change, the one seemed not slower or more tedious than the other. He reached Geneva, but he could not rest there, hurrying forward, still forward.

The sun was setting as William descended at the little inn in the village of Chamouni. He was so exhausted that he could scarcely stand, but he left the house, passed down a lane to a road which wound through the open fields, and stood in the very shadow of Mont Blanc. The village bells were ringing for vespers, filling the air with their clear melody; floods of mingled gold and rose-color bathed the distant peaks, and spread like a veil over the narrow valley, while above him towered the summit of the mountain, dazzling in its awful whiteness, and lending a solemn majesty to the whole scene. Sears remained transfixed! So near that she might have heard the sound of his footsteps stood Catharine, motionless, amid the stern grandeur of Nature's solitude.

He knew not if he cried out, but she turned, saw him, took a few steps forward and sank into his extended arms.

"You have come back, William; oh, I knew that you had not left me forever!"

Then the tide of memory surged over his

conscience, but there came also the conviction of her truth.

"It is all a mad dream, Catharine, tell me so with your own lips—say that all he told me was black falsehood."

"William, that man has been my evil destiny, he made my life a torture, then thrust himself between my heart and yours!"

"That man, Catharine—he is my father, Oh, it is not true—he was not—you never loved him! Never by your own weakness gave him this terrible power over us."

She started from his embrace and stood there erect and still. Suddenly she flung out her arms with a wild gesture.

"It is all a maze—I can understand nothing—your father, he your father? And he has told you that I loved him? Once he dared breathe words in my ear, from which a wife turns with indignation—never but once, though their memory has lain on my soul like a degradation. I stand in the world nameless, disgraced, forsaken; but the bitter pang of all has been to know that I breathed in the same sphere with that man—yet God forgive what I say, he is your father. Let us never think of it again! You are ill—you can hardly stand. Come with me—Janet and I will nurse you—we will go South, far away to bright Italy—happiness will follow us there! Oh, William, I could not answer you on that day when you pleaded for a single evidence of my love, but I tell you now that even death itself shall not separate us."

"Oh, my God! had I known this sooner!"

"Forget this past, William, we will find a new life beyond! We have suffered so much, struggled so long, but I remember nothing of it now—the sister they tore from my arms is in heaven and watches over us in this hour."

"Sister, your sister?"

"My sister—my own darling! My husband died before he could revoke his terrible will—they took my sister from me—I hurried to Europe in search of her—worked, toiled only to regain her—but she died, yes, and now I am thankful for it—you are left me still."

"Your name, tell me your name!"

"I am Catharine Lennox, and she was my little Nellie."

"Nellie! Stop—do not approach me—curse me—kill me—that girl is my wife."

She comprehended nothing—gazing in his face with a horrible fear that the suffering of those weeks had made him mad.

"She is dead, William, little Nellie is dead!"

"She lives—it was only a lie like the rest—she lives, and I have married her."

"Nellie lives, and is your wife?"

She sank upon the ground, clasping her forehead with her hands.

"Tell me everything, William, make me understand all clearly; at present I am like one struck blind with the sound of an approaching torrent in his ear."

There he stood and related the history of the past weeks, speaking in a cold, hard tone, and his burning eyes fixed upon the snowy peaks, beyond whence phantom hands seemed to beckon him away to death.

"Now, what is left us, Catharine? Don't sit there, neither seeing nor hearing; what remains to be done?"

"Nothing, nothing! Go your way—there is a heaven—a God; we shall meet hereafter."

She rose dreamily and moved away, never once looking back till his agonized voice broke through the mist which enveloped her senses.

"Stop, Catharine, stop! You shall not go—you cannot! Is there a heaven—a hereafter? then let us seek it—I will not lose you, let me rush to death clasping you in my arms!"

"It is not you who speak, William you will be yourself when the shock is over. Go—you must stay no longer—go at once."

She wrung her hands in strong anguish; for the first time the great tears streamed over her face, and her whole frame writhed and shook with despair.

"You cannot endure this, Catharine, you will go mad too!"

"No, I shall die, I thank God—I shall die."

"Die, and leave me alone? Promise that you will not! Let me feel that you are at least on earth! Oh, Catharine, do not heed these scruples of narrow minds; we are free, each morally free, or, at least the law that bound me can give liberty."

"A divorce—consent to that mockery—a divorce granted by a man that I might wed my sister's husband!"

"True, true, I had forgotten! Oh, for some hope, some way of release!"

"Never here, William, there is none; but the life beyond, trust in that!"

"And if we fall to meet in that hereafter—if we find ourselves strangers beyond the stars. I cannot believe, I will not wait! You shall go with me, Catharine, I will not lose you now."

Tempted, and sorely tried; but her pure soul never yielded. She stood there and prayed aloud, till he covered beneath a sense of his own weakness and degradation. She turned, pressed her lips upon his forehead, cold and pure, then motioned him away. He obeyed without a word, passing down the narrow road toward the village. To be continued.