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THE RIVAL COUSINS;

—OR—

Frances Vaughan's Secret.

CONCLUDED.

"YES," he replied, "you are somewhat changed." But these bright eyes and this glow of interest belong to Frances Vaughan as I knew her.

She glanced up at him. He was attractive to women in general from the ready appreciation and kindly sympathy one read in his face. But for that it would have repelled, and even now he could easily keep persons from trespassing upon his generosity. Not handsome as the boyish face of Ross Stanhope, but good and noble, and just now the embodiment of friendship to her, for she could not fancy a man of this stamp entertaining any warmer feeling for her. She did Edith full justice in rating her charms so highly, and from what she had remarked the previous evening, she came to a sudden and positive conclusion. Yet she felt, in any event, sure of her friend.

"Let us go down this path," he said, presently, "and you shall tell me what you have been doing these three years."

It was easy to begin at that distant period. How many kindly lessons he had given her, heeded too little, alas, as she realized now, but coming back fresh and full of meaning. At first she had tried to be patient and earnest, but latterly the difference between herself and Edith had become so marked. It seemed as if every thing she did was wrong in the sight of her cousin and grandfather. She had allowed it to make her reckless, indifferent, and, worse than all, sway her into one fatal step that she would have given worlds to recall. But she thrust it out of sight now, quieting her conscience with the promise of confessing it to him at the earliest opportunity. And as they neared the house again, the signs of awakening on every hand were too plain to be misunderstood.

"Breakfast will soon be ready, and our walk has been a long one," she said, turning, and then bade him a graceful adieu.

He came up to the wide veranda just in time to greet Mr. Vaughan, and there Edith found the two as she crossed the hall, like a fresh and cloudless dawn herself.

Frances had her morning's toilet to re-arrange. The listless fingers had received some new impetus; indeed the whole face was transformed. It seemed strange to her when two hours ago she had been so miserable. Was there any stability to her character?

Edith noticed the difference, but made no remark, for she was too much occupied in entertaining Mr. Murray. Some better news from her secret correspondent, perhaps. And after breakfast, when she would have carried him off, he included Frances in the little party; but the brightness that had made her so charming out there under the trees was slowly dying away.

Evan Murray's quick brain penetrated the lack of harmony between these two. It was as he had half feared years ago, and yet he believed, or desired to, that Edith possessed too much nobleness of soul than to indulge such petty resentments. He knew that Mr. Vaughan designed Woodlea for Edith's portion, and that Frances' coming had never injured her prospects in the slightest degree. There was sufficient for her beside. He began to understand that Edith felt herself aggrieved in a finer point also. She did not care to share

any of her possessions with her cousin, not even the love that might have blessed them both. She had never sought to attract Frances and her grandfather together, but rather widened the breach.

Not that she was noticeably unjust or unkind. Indeed, in some ways she manifested a desire for the other's happiness, but it must be in a channel that did not conflict with her own enjoyments. There she barred Frances out relentlessly.

Yet Mr. Murray's coming was destined to work a change. He had the rare faculty to bring forth the best in those with whom he came in contact. Frances felt it, and though her wild dream had been quenched before the first day ended, the desire still remained. She did not dare repeat her morning walk, for she had a consciousness that Edith's stricter sense would condemn such a proceeding if she knew such rambles were not solitary ones, and she had no desire to take upon herself any new burthen of secrecy. And though Mr. Murray managed sometimes of an evening to have a little unrestrained chat with her, it could not have the freedom of that first conversation. Once he had said—

"Have you given up your morning walks? I seem to wait in vain for some one to share mine."

"It is not a habit with me," she had returned gravely.

A man with an insight less keen would have relinquished the idea of bringing her to a more cheerful and open life when she so resolutely lingered in the shade. But some old dream urged him on. Not that they were dull at Woodlea. Mr. Vaughan was hospitable, if rather exclusive, and the summer season brought some delightful society to the village. In company Frances was sometimes gay to extravagance, but it was something that pained rather than pleased. Every day deepened the curious interest he had taken in her, which under some circumstances might have been love.

"Ah," Mr. Murray said, coming upon Frances Vaughan suddenly, one morning in the library. "I have absolutely found you disengaged for once, or are you going to plead some important business and run away?"

She looked as if she desired to, but there was no reasonable excuse at hand. He studied her face attentively until it flushed deeply.

"You don't like your friend as well as of old," he said, presently. "Have I grown so grave that you are afraid of me?"

She raised her eyes quickly, then, as they drooped, gave a little embarrassed laugh, and answered indifferently.

"Do you know," he continued, "that I think you have hardly any right to treat me in this manner? Nearly a fortnight ago we renewed our old bond, and you have shunned the observance of it in every respect. Am I to believe that was only a girlish impulse? You said then you needed a friend."

His voice was low and winning, one of the tones that appeal directly to the heart.

"I told you the truth," she returned, slowly.

"What is the difficulty? You are not happy. I have learned that, and though I can see that your life here has been in many respects unfortunate, the shadow is not so dense but some ray can penetrate it."

"It is not that," and now her cheek paled as she made a long pause, glancing away from him to the lawn beyond the window.

"What then? It is so much to me that I ask."

If she had turned, the look in his face would have startled her, but she was too deeply occupied with her own thoughts to question his.

"Frances," he began, "I have a story to tell you. Years ago, when you first came to Woodlea, you brought to me a new and peculiar interest. Your sunny nature, your frankness, your high soul that was honor itself, awoke in me a strong desire to watch the dawn of such a womanhood. It should have been developed by tenderest care and appreciation, and though when I left you I had a half fear, still it was impossible for me to remain. And now I find you dwarfed and repressed, cold where you should be

genial and charming. I should not have spoken of my love so soon, but—"

"O, Mr. Murray!" and Frances Vaughan sprang up suddenly, her face full of terror. "You have no right to say this to me, or rather I have no right to listen. I was not dreaming of such a thing."

"I have the right a man always has when he loves a woman, that of telling her. And though I do not expect you to answer me now, I did not want any misunderstanding between us, or any foolish scruple to keep you from a woman's natural heritage, love."

"I have shut myself out forever," she said, in accents of passionate despair.

I have taken the cross when I might have had the gold. I should have told you all that morning—would have if I had imagined this ending. But I thought you would love—"

"Your cousin Edith. I have read you rightly thus far. I guessed you shunned me on this account."

"Not that alone. I must brave your displeasure, knowing that I have sinned past forgiveness, and confess."

There was a slight rustle in the hall, and Frances paused, trembling in every limb. As Edith entered, she turned her face away, and began searching for a book.

Edith Vaughan was as superbly calm as if she did not suspect she had interrupted an important conversation. "Not a moment too soon," she thought within herself, and a fierce pang swept over her heart, followed by one of triumph at the consciousness, amounting to belief, that Frances was no longer free. What could a man like Mr. Murray see in such a child?

When Frances could command herself sufficiently, she left the room. Mr. Murray was almost irritated at the interruption, and studied some excuse for a speedy departure, but Mr. Vaughan's entrance put this resolve to flight. He gave Edith a message for her cousin concerning some arrangements for the evening. Thus armed, she sought Frances immediately.

The young girl had yielded to her first impulse of passionate tears. Like a lightning flash the fatal mistake of her life gleamed before her, half stunning her with the knowledge. The web she had woven about herself in a moment of girlish weakness now held her in giant coils. There was no escape. Now only the truth was possible, and that could not save her. And to have missed such tenderness!

The cold, calm voice of Edith grated harshly upon her shrinking nerves, and she covered beneath the pitiless look. Edith came nearer.

"How long is this scheming and duplicity to be carried on?" she asked, at length.

"It was not my fault. O, Edith, believe that I never sought him, that I never dreamed of his caring for me!"

"What right have you to any man's regard?"

"None," the younger said, humbly. "In another moment I would have told him all."

"You had better put on your ring, and show yourself in your true colors," Edith responded, bitterly.

"You know then? O, Edith, have a little pity on me. I was wild at the time, hungering and thirsting for love, and I believed in Ross Stanhope. But I have been so miserable since, that I have prayed daily to die."

"You are his wife?" Edith asked, hardly sure of her assertion, and yet resolved to know.

"I am his wife."

"You chose your own destiny. I warned you, and you must have known the consequences."

Looking back, it seemed as if some strange fascination must have possessed Frances Vaughan. She could not account for it herself.

"The sooner this miserable work is confessed the better. I have only suspected your secret, though I might have assured myself of the truth long ago. You know that grandfather will be very angry."

"If you would tell him, Edith—"

"I? You should have thought of the end before you took the step. I certainly shall decline having any thing to do with it."

It was useless to urge. There was not even sympathy in that proud face before

her. As Edith turned away, she made no effort to detain her.

Left to herself, a dozen wild plans flitted through Frances Vaughan's brain. Once she rose, determined to steal away unperceived; then she asked herself where she should go? Ross Stanhope had promised to arrange a home for her in the city and come for her immediately, but since his departure he had been constantly making excuses, and in his last letter said it would be best for her to remain at Woodlea through the summer, as he was likely to be away on a business tour, very important to him. Indeed, she did not know but he had already gone. How could she brave her grandfather's indignation? And yet there was no other course possible. The consciousness of being beloved would have inspired her with courage, but she had begun to doubt this, for on the very day of their marriage Mr. Stanhope had shown some annoyance when he learned she could not demand her own small fortune until she was twenty-one, and that Mr. Vaughan's displeasure was a thing she dared not encounter at present. He had expressed much sorrow for his hasty words, and she had forgiven them, but now they returned with renewed force. To thrust herself upon him, an unwelcome burthen, was not to be thought of except in an extremity. If she could tell Mr. Murray the particulars of this miserable story, and ask his advice.

She made her headache sufficient excuse for not appearing at dinner. It was mid-afternoon when she crept down stairs, pale and trembling, and found the household assembled in the library, her grandfather warmly discussing some point.

"He was no favorite of mine," Edith said, as she entered.

"We not infrequently meet men of that stamp in society," Mr. Murray rejoined. "They are entertaining, and in certain respects refined, while their claim to genius attracts not a few real friends. It is a source of regret to me that they have not sufficient wisdom to choose an honorable path, and do something worthy of a man's ambition."

"We were speaking of Mr. Stanhope," Mr. Vaughan said, turning to Frances. "Here is the end of his career at present," and he pointed out a paragraph in a paper. "I do regret that he should have been tolerated at Woodlea, or that either of you should have met him."

He looked sharply at Frances as he uttered this. She ran her eyes over the account, growing deathly pale. Ross Stanhope had been arrested for forgery, so clearly proven that his guilt did not admit of a doubt. For a moment it seemed as if she would faint, then her grandfather's voice denouncing him, demanded some attention on her part. She gave one quick glance at Edith, pure, proud and stately, and then caught the look of anxious questioning in Mr. Murray's eyes.

"I am his wife," she said, just above her breath. "It matters little now how I came to yield to such an infatuation; I can only confess the fact. I have forfeited all right to your care."

Even the presence of a visitor could not restrain Mr. Vaughan, whose anger now knew no bounds. He denounced Frances as an ingrate, and accused her of following the low tastes she had inherited from her mother, declaring that Woodlea was no home for her, and never could be again.

"Hush," Edith said, at length. "You excite yourself fearfully," for he was trembling in every limb. "Frances, leave me with him."

She had scarcely crossed the hall when Mr. Murray rejoined her. He gave one look at the strained, tearless eyes.

"O," she said, in a faint, broken voice, "don't pity me. I deserve it all. Grandfather was right—I haven't any of the Vaughan pride. I have never been happy here. If any one had loved me, perhaps I might not have cared so much for Ross Stanhope. But he seemed so good, so sweet and tender. I can never make you understand the temptation it was. I thought he would take me away from Woodlea; I dreamed of being so happy, and this is the end."

"If I had returned sooner—if, indeed, I had never gone away!"

"No," she said, putting away the outstretched hands. "I never could

have been worthy. Do not think of me. Edith is so much better and grander. And heaven knows how sorry I am to have caused you one pang. Cast me out utterly, as they all will. I have made my own misery."

She darted away and flew to her room. Ross Stanhope in a felon's cell—her husband! He must, he would be glad to see her now, and it was best to go at once. His mother lived somewhere in the city, and she would find her, share the sorrow and the shame. The thought gave her a sudden courage. She made a few preparations, and wrote a hasty note explaining her resolve and giving a few particulars of her marriage. Then she stole softly down stairs to listen. A servant was coming from her grandfather's room.

"How is he?" she asked, tremulously.

"He has had a bad turn, but is getting better. Your cousin and Mr. Murray are with him. They think he will not need the doctor."

Much relieved at this, Frances speedily equipped herself, taking a few valuables and the money with which she was kept liberally supplied. In less than an hour the train would leave, and she had barely time to walk to the station. She locked the door that they might not suspect her so soon, and passed through the servants' hall unobserved. No one met her in the grounds, though she scarcely drew a comfortable breath until she found herself leaving Woodlea far behind. She had been to the city on little pleasure excursions with Edith, when their grandfather was along to care for them, but she felt helpless and undecided now. It would be evening when she reached her destination, and nothing could be done until the next morning. It would be wiser to go at once to the hotel where they usually stayed, instead of rambling about seeking some hiding-place. No one would search for her thus early.

Frances Stanhope passed an almost intolerable night. She made some inquiries of a servant, and at the earliest moment practicable started out to gain an interview with her husband, veiled herself closely, and shrinking from every person with whom she came in contact. At last she reached the gloomy place, and found herself too soon. Several others were waiting, and Frances' heart well nigh failed her. The rude sights and sounds, the coarse faces and loud tones, filled her with dismay. She cowered pitifully beside a woman closely veiled like herself, but about whom there was an unmistakable air of refinement. Her turn came first, and the strained ears caught the sound—Stanhope. She grasped the woman's arm.

"You are his mother," she gasped, "Ross Stanhope's mother!"

"Yes, I am his mother," and Mrs. Stanhope tried to loosen the clasp.

"Have pity upon me," she implored. "I am his wife;" and throwing aside her veil, Frances encountered a sorrowful face, but one she knew she need not fear. For a moment the two studied each other; Frances would have clung to almost any one who betrayed a kindly heart. Her youth and girlish loveliness touched Mrs. Stanhope deeply, yet this was the first announcement of her son's marriage, and she was silent from surprise. She drew her one side, presently, and began to question her. The brief story was soon told.

"You had better see him first," Mrs. Stanhope said. "I will relinquish my right," and she requested the warden to conduct the young girl to Mr. Stanhope's cell, through the dismal corridor where their steps woke echoes that fell strangely on her ears. Then the bolt in the lock snapped with a sharp click, and the man motioned her to enter.

She was pale and trembling with terror and a sense of shame of which she could not divest herself. She stood quite still, not daring to advance.

"Good Heavens! What evil genius sent you here?" Ross Stanhope said, not unkindly, and yet in a tone that brought the tears to her eyes.

"To see you. O, Ross—" and all her firmness gave way.

"I wish you had not come;" and though he took her in his arms, he gave no other token of welcome. "Why didn't you keep your secret? It can't do me any good, all this fuss, unless