



REGET IT. SHE KNOWS HOW I LOVE HER, AND SHE DOES NOT BLAME ME.

Bewildered by the apparent mystery of the affair, Trevelian tried in vain to induce the baronet to speak more freely. He learned only that I had not been aware of her peculiar relations toward Therwell that morning at their first meeting, and that pecuniary assistance would be of no avail toward freeing her from the engagement. He saw, however, that the father could not even think of the proposed marriage without expending poignant anguish, and that all his pleadings and reproaches were useless.

But he was resolved not to relinquish the hopes that made life dear to him until he had communicated with the maiden. As if reading his thoughts, Sir Allyn said huskily: "Gladly, I beg you not to see Ido to-day. She has enough to bear—poor child! I have been already an eventful day for her, I fear."

"Say no more, Sir Allyn," interrupted the viscount, rising. "I will not see her to-day, but afterward I shall hold myself free to call upon her. She understands my feelings toward her; she will have faith in me as I will in her. I shall respect your confidence, but I am sure that Heaven will never permit this proposed marriage to be consummated."

He held out his hand in respectful pity for the baronet, and then turned and left the room, going into the corridor. At the very threshold he ran against Therwell, whose attitude was that of an eavesdropper. The rivals exchanged glances, and Therwell, cool and self-assured as he usually was, was momentarily puzzled before the flashing eyes of Lord Trevelian; he then entered the study, while the young viscount passed on through the hall and out at the front door of the mansion.

On gaining a little distance he paused and looked back with an expression of ineffable love upon his face. "Give Ido up!" he said, half aloud. "Never!—never! I will follow this mystery. I will unmask the designs of that scoundrel, free Sir Allyn from his clutches, and then claim my noble darling for my wife. We shall see which shall triumph—Therwell or Trevelian—villany or love!"

CHAPTER XIV. "YOU MUST LEAVE MY HOUSE IMMEDIATELY." "What can we not endure when pains are lessened by the hope of cure?" "NAB." The mysterious bride of Sir Hugh Chellis stood before her baffled guardian, her face lighted up with the triumph of her deliverance, and her eyes luminous with a grand and solemn joy. Mr. Wilmer turned his face from her, but the ex-governess, pale and tearful, watched her every movement, as if fascinated by the change in the being she had assisted to wrong and oppress. Lady Chellis' maid could not avoid casting frequent looks of exultation at the discomfited enemies of her young mistress, and she drew nearer to the latter, as if to call attention to the fact that but for her the position of affairs at the Wilmer mansion would have been very different at this moment.

For some moments there was a profound silence, which was broken at last by the young bride, who said, quietly: "Uncle James—Mr. Wilmer—I have proved to you that I am legally a wife, and that your guardianship over me has ceased entirely. I am now my own mistress. You will find me able to defend myself and to take possession of my fortune, which now passes into my own hands."

Mr. Wilmer started, and said, huskily: "It is true, Adah, that I have seen your marriage certificate, but you may have forged it."

"You can consult the church register, Mr. Wilmer," she said proudly. Her late guardian moved uneasily in his chair, but did not lift his gaze to her face. In truth, he had no doubt of the authenticity of the marriage certificate, but he was puzzled, stunned, and stupefied by the suddenly acquired freedom of his injured niece.

"It can't be true," he ejaculated. "How could you find a husband so quickly? You could not have accosted a gentleman in the street and requested him to marry you. You have spirit enough in you for that, I believe; but you would have been repulsed as a lunatic or worse. How did you obtain your husband?"

A quick flash shot into the cheeks of the young bride—a flash of maidenly shame and confusion—but her gaze was as clear, and her manner as composed as before, and she replied: "That is my secret, Mr. Wilmer. It is enough that I am satisfied."

"I don't believe your husband is Sir Hugh Chellis at all," declared Mr. Wilmer. "The Chellis' are one of the proudest families in the kingdom. Miss Dorothy Chellis is immensely rich, and I have heard that she is extremely fond of her wild young nephew; but she would never give a penny to strangers if she but fancied that he would contract a mesalliance."

"A marriage with Adah Wilmer would not be a mesalliance even for Sir Hugh Chellis," said the young bride, haughtily. "Miss Chellis herself once hoped to enter our family."

"True, but she did not expect to marry a lunatic," said Mr. Wilmer, with a sneer. "Sir Hugh, if he ever heard your name, and of course he has, has already heard that you are of infirm mind. He would not have married you, knowing who you were, and he would not have done so unless he were familiar with your history. I think I have proved that you have been cleverly imposed upon by some person who has neither right nor title to the name of Sir Hugh Chellis."

person of whom he knew nothing, and whose face he had not then ever seen." A remembrance of his honest blue eyes, and of the innate nobility expressed in his features came in time to save her from torturing anguish. Representing all signs of doubt and agitation, she said: "It is enough, Mr. Wilmer, that I am satisfied, and that I have proofs that I am married. The marriage is legal, whether my husband be a baronet or a chimney-sweep. All I desired was to be married. At last I can speak freely. I know why you have kept me a prisoner in my rooms for years; I know why you have given out to the world that I am in delicate health, and in an unquiet state of mind. You know, as well as I do, that my health would have been perfect if I had not been kept a close prisoner. You know, and the nature of your will knows, and she indicated Mrs. Barrat by a gesture, "that my intellect is as sound as yours."

"Well, what of it?" "What of it?" replied Lady Chellis, her eyes flashing with indignation and contempt. "Can you ask, What of it? What of the fact that since my early girlhood I have been confined to my own rooms, without a friend, save my poor foster-sister, Nelly? What of the fact that for years I have been allowed to see no face save yours, Nelly's, and Mrs. Barrat's? What of the fact that all my household servants—those who served my father and loved his daughter—have been trained to consider me sickly, and of infirm mind? What of the fact that my family friends have been repulsed in all their attempts to see me, and have been sent away with the story that the sight of strange faces would but aggravate my malady? What of the fact that my youth has been blighted, and my girlhood been full of torture instead of happiness? Good heavens! Can you ask 'What of it?'"

And her voice rang with the clearness of a flute through the long saloon. "I wonder that the question did not pass your false, hypocritical tongue."

Mr. Wilmer shrank aghast before this outburst of righteous indignation. He moved restlessly, glanced from the glowing face of the young lady to the sympathetic countenance of her maid, and then his gaze sought the features of Mrs. Barrat, as if he were desirous of her aid and counsel.

But Mrs. Barrat was as frightened as himself. She had retreated a little before one of the bride's eye-like glances, and appeared now undecided whether to depart or remain.

Receiving no encouragement from his confederate, Mr. Wilmer strove to appear self-possessed and said: "Adah, my poor niece, do you know that your present excitement goes far to confirm all that I have ever said regarding the state of your mental health? If any stranger were to see you now, would he blame me for believing your mind was unhinged? Perhaps I have been misled by my fears," and his tone expressed hypocritical grief. "Perhaps my anxiety prevented me from judging fairly. If this be so, Adah—if I have been deceived—mistaken—if my love for you has caused me to err—"

Sir Hugh's young bride drew herself up indignantly. "If you have been mistaken," she exclaimed, her voice sounding like the voice of an accused angel. "You have not been mistaken, Mr. Wilmer. You have known as well as I have that my mind has never for one instant wavered from its just balance. If you had fancied me really ill, would you not have procured for me the attendance of a physician? Would you not have—But why do I parley with you? Let us come to the point at once. Your wicked designs against me have been assisted by the fact that during the last few months of his life my poor father had not the command of all his faculties. You have given out to the world that I had inherited his infirmity, when you well knew that his infirmity was the result of disease, and not constitutional. You have pretended that I have been for years sickly and delicate. Do I look so?"

She did look delicate from the effects of long confinement, but that her health had been seriously impaired, no one who looked in her clear, bright eyes, at her now flushed cheeks, and at her rounded figure, could for an instant believe.

Mr. Wilmer maintained silence, and the bride continued, in her solemnly accusing tones: "No, I am not sickly, and I have never been ill. My mind is not impaired, and never has been. To carry out your wicked schemes it was necessary that you should act as you have done. It was you, James Wilmer, who tended my father during the last months of his life. It was you who established a paramount influence over him. It was you who persuaded him to make an unjust will, acting upon his well known preference for early marriages. It was you who dictated the terms of that will, by which I was to marry before attaining the age of twenty-one, or forfeit to you the whole of my fortune. My poor father could not have known what he was doing when he signed his name to that fatal document—a document which has wrecked his daughter's happiness."

Her voice was low and sad as she uttered the last words. "From the moment of my father's death," she continued, comparing her momentary weakness, "you schemed to prevent my marriage before the specified time. You professed a constant solicitude for my health, declaring to everyone your fears that I had inherited from my father a predisposition to insanity. You enlisted my governess, Mrs. Barrat, in your schemes. You gradually curtailed my liberty. You related to my friends and my parents' friends exaggerated accounts of my childish freaks, and words, innocent in themselves, yet constructed by you into indications of a mind trembling in the balance. Every exhibition of childish gaiety, every period of sadness, when I wept for my dead parents, was declared by you to be unnatural. And, at last, when I openly rebelled against your odious tyranny and constant vigilance, you confined me to my rooms, and gave out that my insanity had become an established fact, and that I was subject to dangerous moods, in which I might do myself or others violence. Everyone believed you, for were you not the only brother of my poor father? Had he not loved you tenderly and constituted you the guardian of his daughter? Could anyone doubt your affection for your niece, when you never spoke of her parents, and afflicted without hypocritical tears? So you have been permitted to carry out your schemes unquestioned. And in three days more," she added, slowly and impressively, "I should have been twenty-one, and unmarried, if nothing had occurred to save your plans."

"Adah, you wrong me, cruelly," exclaimed Mr. Wilmer. I am not the monster you have painted me. No one would credit such assertions."

Adah smiled quietly. "Where is your husband, if you are married?" continued her late guardian. "Is he waiting in the hall?"

"No, he is not with me. I made an agreement with him that I should be unmolested by him, declared Lady Chellis. "I can bear his name or not, as I prefer. My marriage is to be kept secret until I choose to announce it. But, in my case, Sir Hugh's path in life will be different from mine. Ours will be a marriage only in name."

Mr. Wilmer looked astonished, and then a quick gleam of satisfaction passed over his face. His busy brain had renewed the scheming which had just seemed to have received its fatal check.

His niece had detailed her history without a particle of exaggeration, but even his bitter experience had not enabled her to comprehend fully his utter baseness.

Her father had been the elder and half brother of James Wilmer, and as different from him as light is different from darkness. He had been a rear-admiral in the navy, and possessed a sailor's nature, noble, brave and unassuming. He had married early, before attaining the age of twenty, and his bride was three years younger than he. This early marriage had been blessed with a degree of harmony and happiness but seldom vouchsafed to any union. Not a cloud had shadowed their united lives, except the necessity for frequent absences on the part of the admiral, and the fact that for many years they were childless.

But, at last, when the old sailor's face had grown wrinkled, and his hair had begun to be streaked with grey, and his wife had become a grave, dignified matron, a child was born to them, the Adah of our story. It had needed but her advent to fill their cup of joy to the brim, and the fond father exulted in his happy home and the society of his dear ones, until, when Adah had attained her twelfth year, that home was suddenly darkened by the shadow of death and the dearest of the dear ones had drooped and faded into her grave.

Stricken by the terrible blow, he gave himself up to grief. He summoned his half-brother, James Wilmer, to his home, and relinquished his affairs into his hands. His mind gave way, and for months he was insensible to the ministrations of his daughter, or to the consolations of his friends. He was never violent in his insanity. The bluff old sailor, who had been a terror to evil doers upon his ship, submitted himself to be led about by Adah, like a child, gathered flowers, and sat in the sunshine, indulging in harmless vagaries, and talking continually of his lost wife.

A year after her death he joined her in the world beyond, and the orphaned Adah became the charge of James Wilmer. Her parents had been alike wealthy, and their united fortunes had descended to their only child. As fortune loves to shower favors upon those who have no need of them, so Adah's wealth was augmented by a legacy from her godmother, and by a legacy or two from other sources—thus constituting her an heir of remarkable pretensions. To all this wealth her uncle was, of course, the next heir, in the event of her dying when unmarried, and before her attaining her majority. He father's singular will, made through the influence of the younger brother, however, opened a straighter path to the possession of the larger share of these united fortunes, and it became the whole plan of James Wilmer's existence to prevent his niece's marriage before the specified period. He engaged for her a governess—Mrs. Barrat—upon whom he could depend to second his schemes, and from the moment of his brother's death entered upon a course of action well calculated to bring about the very event he desired. He let fall insinuations to the effect that Adah had inherited her father's predisposition to insanity; he termed her grief at her bereavements "violent," "ungovernable," and "insane."

When the edge of her sorrow had worn off, and she became at times gay and frolicsome, he sighed over her unequal spirits.

When she wandered by herself in the park, at her country home, he ordered Mrs. Barrat to follow her, lest she should do herself any injury. Of course the high-spirited girl rebelled against the restrictions placed upon her movements, and upbraided her relative, but he professed to believe the malady, against the encroachments of which he had so long guarded her, had overcome her mind at last, and he condemned her to the strictest seclusion.

There was no one to combat his decision. The servants believed that their young mistress had succumbed to her father's malady, and the friends of her parents applauded her uncle for the tender and devoted care of his niece.

The fact that Admiral Wilmer had been insane during the last year of his life prevented any doubts of the truthfulness of the girl's guardian, and Adah's life had been passed in deep solitude, cheered only by the presence of her maid, Nelly.

Mrs. Barrat proved an able coadjutor of the villainous uncle. She was a needy young widow, who had been thankful enough at first for a home and shelter, but who had gradually aspired to become the wife of James Wilmer. He had, in fact, promised to elevate her from the post of governess to that of mistress of the house, in the event of the success of his plans. Once passed Adah's majority, her fortune would become his, and should she remain unmarried he offered to share that fortune with Mrs. Barrat and make her his wife, provided she lent him efficient aid, and so for years she had worked in his interests, patiently and anxiously looking forward to her reward.

During the years of Adah's confinement, Mr. Wilmer had scarcely dared to leave his niece's country home, lest his wickedness should meet with its deserved exposure.

He liked society, and desired to become familiar with the gay world, and as last had been tempted to stay a winter in town. Adah, with her maid, who had always professed to believe her insane, and who had frequently acted as her go-between, and the ex-governess accompanied him, and he had employed himself in fancied security, little dreaming that his prisoner would circumvent his schemes.

It was no wonder that he looked at her in astonishment now, for she was very different from the pale, desponding girl who had so often pleaded to him with tears for

a moment's freedom, for a moment that she might wander unrestrained, and listen to the songs of birds and feel the sunshine on her cheeks.

But his renewed schemings received a shock when Adah said, quietly: "I ought to tell you, Mr. Wilmer, that the fact of my living apart from my husband will not benefit you. You must leave my house immediately—you and Mrs. Barrat. For years I have longed to say to you what I say now. Go!"

She extended her arm, pointing toward the door, with the commanding gesture of a queen.

Mr. Wilmer arose, livid and enraged, but his eyes drooped before her cold and haughty look, and in a originating tone he cried: "Adah, I am poor—I have nothing of my own. I have lost my property in unfortunate speculations. Do not turn me out upon the world—I am too old to work. I have no friends who will assist me if you turn me off. Forgive me, Adah, and let me stay."

"No, Mr. Wilmer, the same roof cannot shelter us both," declared Adah, resolutely, her voice cold and stern. "You must go."

"But what will people say?" pleaded her late guardian. "If you make known the whole story our affairs will become the talk of the whole town. How will Sir Hugh Chellis like that?"

The young bride, in her first indignation, had determined to expose the infamy of her relative, and clear herself from all suspicion of insanity, but her uncle's question suggested to her that there was another of whom she must now think—another whose pride might be deeply wounded by the exposure of her wrongs. Besides her womanly delicacy shrank from bringing shame upon the name her father had borne, and she had just fears that the peculiar circumstances attending her marriage would be revealed to the confusion of herself and her young husband.

No, Mr. Wilmer must go in peace. To permit him to go in poverty would make food for gossiping tongues. He must be sent away to spend his life in obscurity, and she would allow him a small yearly stipend, sufficient to keep him from want, but only in consideration of the name he bore, and of the fact that her father once loved and trusted him.

She told him of her decision, and her words were full of gall-like bitterness for the proud, discomfited man who had schemed to possess her heritage.

"But if I go to-day," he expostulated, "I will talk your audacious restoration to health will excite attention—"

"Be it so!" said Adah, "I can endure it, since they will not guess the truth."

"But I cannot go so soon, Adah. Give me at least a week."

Firm in the consciousness that she had passed beyond his power, and that his presence could not injure her, the young bride yielded assent to his prayer, and granted him a week in which to seek another home.

"And I!" said Mrs. Barrat, hesitating to call attention upon herself, yet fearing that she was to be sent forth with her year of service unrequited. "Mr. Wilmer has engaged to marry me. My place is with him. May I not stay, Miss Will—Lady Chellis? Only one week, for I have no place to go to."

Nelly pulled her mistress's sleeve, and whispered to her to deny the request.

"She is no relation, my lady, if that old viper is!" she said.

It did not need Nelly's suggestion to decide Lady Chellis. She had reflected that the widow had been but an instrument in the hands of a master, and though she felt for her only scorn, contempt and indignation, she did not blame her so severely as she did Mr. Wilmer. She therefore replied that she would give her shelter until the morrow, but that she must then go.

"I shall allow Mr. Chellis a hundred pounds a year," she declared, "that will find him food, shelter, and clothing in some distant spot. As for you, I do not charge myself with your future."

The widow wept and pleaded, and appealed to Mr. Wilmer, but Adah's decision was unalterable. "Now that this matter is settled," said Lady Chellis, "I will assume the command of my own house. For the present, I will take possession of the drawing-room."

"Malice scorned puts out itself; but argued gives a kind of credit to a false accusation."—MASHROKH.

On leaving the presence of Lady Chellis, her baffled guardian crossed the corridor, and sought refuge in the library, shrinking from the gaze of the footman who was at his post, and whose curiosity seemed to have been greatly excited by the singular appearance of the bridegroom's visitor, whom in some way he associated with the recent disappearance of Miss Wilmer.

Flinging himself into a chair, Mr. Wilmer was almost unconscious that Mrs. Barrat had quietly followed him, had closed and noiselessly locked the door, and now stood before him with an anxious, troubled face, until her hard voice broke the silence.

"Well," she said, bitterly, "there we are, checked and robbed of all that we fancied we held secure. We have been outwitted by a simple girl who is more ignorant of the world than a child."

"It's all your fault," interrupted Mr. Wilmer, savagely. "If you had remained at home last night, Adah could not have left the house. What business had you to trust the key of her rooms to that treacherous maid? If you had exercised proper caution and vigilance, Adah might have been at this moment upstairs."

"True; we did not dream that extra care and caution were required. I left her last night for the first time for months, and then only to visit my relatives. She escaped this morning before I had risen. I have often left the keys with her maid, for you told me yourself that she could be relied upon, and that she believed her mistress to be really insane. I am not to blame. Miss Wilmer has been so quiet of late that I believed she had become resigned to her fate. You saw her yourself yesterday, and told me she was perfectly apathetic."

"I did say so. I really thought so. We have been cleverly imposed upon. Oh, if I had only suspected that her apathy was assumed! If I had only imagined that her maid was treacherous to us! Now all is lost!"

"It would seem so," said the ex-governess, her tones appearing calm by contrast with her employer's impetuous manner.

"Seem so?" repeated Mr. Wilmer, with savage irony. "I should think it would seem so. I am a beggar—dependent man upon the woman I have injured—indebted to her for a paltry pittance, scarcely sufficient to keep soul and body together. I must vegetate in some distant country village, shut out from all the enjoyments to which I have looked forward for years. I have planned to possess her wealth—I have revealed in anticipations of the time when all these luxuries," and he gave a rapid, comprehensive glance around the study apartment, "would be my own. I have dreamed of the time when I should plunge into the gayeties of society, and learn my part among the proudest and wealthiest of the land. And this is the end of all my scheming! This is the fruit for which I have worked and waited so patiently. It was for this that I stifled all remorse, perjured myself, and was merciless to her from whom I now expect mercy."

His voice died away in an angry, despairing groan.

The widow drew nearer to her employer.

"You believe her story, then, of her marriage?" she whispered. "You believe that she has become, legally and truly, the wife of Sir Hugh Chellis, as she declares herself?"

"I believe she is married to somebody," replied Mr. Wilmer, "but her husband may have assumed the name of Sir Hugh. It does not seem probable that the baronet would marry a woman who has been supposed for years to be insane. Yet the certificate is genuine."

"That may be, but there is something wrong about the marriage. Did you notice how she blushed when you questioned her about her husband? It was a blush of shame and confusion, if I read any expression aright, and not a blush of modest embarrassment. Then he did not come with her. Evidently he does not intend to fight her battles, or to take possession here. The truth is, James Wilmer," and the ex-governess lowered her voice, and spoke in a crisp, impressive whisper, "there is a mystery about this sudden marriage, and I think I have penetrated it."

"I will do us no good if you have."

"That remains to be seen," interrupted the woman with an air of self-confidence. "But, before I explain, tell me something about Sir Hugh Chellis."

Mr. Wilmer was about to return an impatient refusal to this request, but the expression on the widow's face induced compliance.

"Sir Hugh is about three and twenty, I believe," he said. "He is gay and wild, fond of company, and knows how to throw away money. Last year he lost several thousand pounds at the Derby races, and I have heard that it did not cure him from betting. He has a very good estate in Wales, but it only produces him about two thousand a year. When his aunt dies he will be immensely rich."

"Is he handsome?"

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