

ONLY A MONTH;

OR, A CURIOUS MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

CHAPTER V.—(Continued).

"Why do you try to hide that from me?" he cried. "Are you already betrothed to this other man?"

"It was only last Sunday," she sobbed. "And I meant to write to you; I did, indeed."

Once more she covered her face with her hands, this time not attempting to hide from Frithiof the beautiful circlet of brilliants on her third finger.

It seemed to him that giant hands seized on him then, and crushed out of him his very life. Yet the pain of living went on remorselessly, and as if from a very great distance he heard Blanche's voice.

"I am engaged to Lord Romieux," she said. "He had been in Norway on a fishing-tour, but it was on the steamer that we first met. And then almost directly I knew that at Munkeggen it had all been quite a mistake, and that I had never really loved you. We met again at one of the watering-places in September; but it was only settled the day before yesterday. I wish—oh, how I wish—that I had written to tell you!"

She stood up impulsively and drew nearer to him.

"Is there nothing I can do to make up for my mistake?" she said, lifting pathetic eyes to his.

"Nothing," he said, bitterly. "Oh, don't think badly of me for it," she pleaded. "Don't hate me."

"Hate you!" he exclaimed. "It will be the curse of my life that I love you—that you have made me love you."

He turned as though to go away. "Don't go without saying goodbye," she exclaimed; and her eyes said more plainly than words, "I do not mind if you kiss me just once more."

He paused, ice one minute, fire the next, yet through it all aware that his conscience was urging him to go without delay.

Blanche watched him tremulously; she drew yet nearer.

"Could we not still be friends?" she said, with a pathetic little quiver in her voice.

"No," he cried, vehemently, yet with a certain dignity in his manner; "no, we could not."

Then, before Blanche could recover enough from her sense of humiliation at this rebuff to speak, he bowed to her and left the room.

She threw herself down on the sofa and buried her face in the cushions. "Oh, what must he think of me? what must he think of me?" she sobbed. "How I wish I had written to him at once and saved myself this dreadful scene! How could I have been so silly! so dreadfully silly! To be afraid of writing a few words in a letter! My poor Viking! he looked so grand as he turned away. I wish we could have been friends still; it used to be so pleasant in Norway; he was so unlike other people; he interested me. And now it is all over, and I shall never be able to meet him again. Oh, I have managed very badly. If I had not been so imprudent on Munkeggen he might have been my cavalier all his life, and I should have liked to show him over her to people. I should have liked to initiate him in everything."

The clock on the mantel-piece struck five. She started up and ran across to one of the mirrors, looking anxiously at her eyes. "Oh, dear! oh, dear! what shall I do?" she thought. "Algernon will be here directly, and I have made a perfect object of myself with crying." Then, as the door bell-rang, she caught up a couvette, sunk down on the sofa, and covered herself up picturesquely. "There is nothing for it but a bad headache," she said to herself.

CHAPTER VI.

On the stairs Frithiof was waylaid by Mr. Morgan; it was with a sort of surprise that he heard his own calm replies to the Englishman's polite speeches, and regrets, and inquiries as to when he returned to Norway, for all the time his head was swimming, and it was astonishing that he could frame a correct English phrase.

His heart was so utterly dead that he could not even think of his home; neither his father nor Sigrid rose before him as he looked down that long, dreary vista of life that lay beyond. He could see only that Blanche was no longer his; that the Blanche he had loved and believed

in had never really existed; that he had been utterly deceived, defrauded; and that something had been taken from him which could never return.

"I will not live a day longer," he said to himself; "not an hour longer." And in the relief of having some attainable thing to desire ardently, were it only death and annihilation, he quickened his pace and felt a sort of renewal of energy and life within him, urging him on, holding before him the one aim which he thought was worth pursuing.

He was alone again, and the twilight for which he had longed was fast closing in upon him; a sort of blue haze seemed gathering over the park; night was coming on. What was this horrible new struggle which was beginning within him? "Evil," "sin," could he not at least do what he would with his own life? Where was the harm in ending that which was hopelessly spoiled and ruined? Was not suicide a perfect legitimate ending to a life?

A voice within him answered his question plainly:

"To the man with a diseased brain—the man who doesn't know what he is about—it is no worse an end than to die in bed of a fever. But to you—you who are afraid of the suffering of life, you who know quite well what you are doing—to you it is sin."

Fight against it as he would, he could not stifle this new consciousness which had arisen within him. Only women or children could hold such a creed; only those who led sheltered innocent, ignorant lives.

Looking back afterward on the frightful struggle, it seemed to him that for ages he had tossed to and fro in that horrible hesitation. In reality all must have been over within a quarter of an hour. There rose before him the recollection of his father as he had last seen him standing on the deck of the steamer, and he remembered the tone of his voice as he had said:

"I look to you, Frithiof, to carry out the aims in which I myself have failed, to live the life that I could wish to have lived."

He saw once again the wistful look in his father's eyes, the mingled love, pride, and anxiety with which he had turned to him, loath to let him go, and yet eager to speed him on his way. Should he now disappoint all his hopes? Should he, deliberately and in the full possession of all his faculties, take a step which must bring terrible suffering to his home people? And then he remembered for the first time that already trouble and vexation and loss had overtaken his father; he knew well how greatly he would regret the connection with the English firm, and he pictured to himself the familiar house in Kalvedalen with a new and unfamiliar cloud upon it, till instead of the longing for death there came to him a nobler longing—a longing to go back and help, a longing to make up to his father for the loss and vexation and the slight which had been put upon him. He began to feel ashamed of the other wish, he began to realize that there was still something to be lived for, though indeed life looked to him as dim and uninviting as the twilight park with its wreaths of gray mist, and its unpeopled solitude.

Emerging once more into the busy world of traffic at Hyde Park Corner, the perception of his forlorn desolation came to him with far more force than in the quiet path by the Serpentine. For the first time he felt keenly that he was in an unknown city, and there came over him a sick longing for Norway, for dear old Bergen, for the familiar mountains, the familiar faces, the friendly greetings of passers-by. For a few minutes he stood still, uncertain which road to take, wondering how in the world he should get through the weary hours of his solitary evening. Close by him a young man stood talking to the occupants of a brougham which had drawn up by the pavement; he heard a word or two of their talk, dimly, almost unconsciously.

"Is the result of the trial known yet?"

"Yes, five years' penal servitude, and no more than he deserves."

"The poor children! what will become of them?"

"Shall you be home by ten? we won't hinder you, then."

"Quite by ten. Tell father that Sardonis is free for the night he wanted him; I met him just now. Good-bye." Then to the coachman, "Home!"

The word startled Frithiof back to the recollection of his own affairs; he had utterly lost his bearings and must ask for direction. He would accost this man who seemed a little less in a hurry than the rest of the world.

"Will you kindly tell me the way to the Arundel Hotel?" he asked.

The young man turned at the sound of his voice, looked keenly at him for an instant, then held out his hand in cordial welcome.

"How are you?" he exclaimed. "What a lucky chance that we should have run across each other in the dark like this! Have you been long in England?"

Frithiof, at the first word of hearty greeting, looked up with startled eyes, and in the dim gas-light he saw the honest English face and kindly eyes of Roy Boniface.

CHAPTER VII.

Meantime the brougham had bowled swiftly away and its two occupants had settled themselves down comfortably as though they were preparing for a long drive.

"Are you warm enough, my child? Better let me have this window down, and you put yours up," said Mrs. Boniface, glancing with motherly anxiety at the fair face beside her.

"You spoil me, mother, dear," said Cecil. "And indeed I do want you not to worry about me. I am quite strong, if you would only believe it."

"Well, well, I hope you are," said Mrs. Boniface, with a sigh. "But any way it's more than you look, child."

And the mother thought wistfully of two graves in a distant cemetery where Cecil's sisters lay; and she remembered with a cruel pang that only a few days ago some friend had remarked to her, with the thoughtless frankness of a rapid talker, about Cecil's delicate appearance.

"I am glad we have seen Doctor Royson," said Cecil, "because now we shall feel quite comfortable, and you won't be anxious any more, mother. It would be dreadful, I think, to have to be a sort of semi-invalid all one's life, though I suppose some people must enjoy it, since Doctor Royson said that half the girls in London were invalided just for want of sensible work. I rather believe, mother, that is what has been the matter with me," and she laughed.

"You, my dear!" said Mrs. Boniface; "I am sure you are not at all idle at home. No one could say such a thing of you."

"But I am always having to invent things to do to keep myself busy," said Cecil. "Mother, I have got a plan in my head now that would settle my work for five whole


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years, and I do so want you to say 'yes' to it."

"It isn't that you want to go into some sisterhood?" asked Mrs. Boniface, her gentle gray eyes filling with tears.

"Oh, no, no," said Cecil, emphatically. "Why, how could I ever go away from home and leave you, darling, just as I am getting old enough to be of use to you? It's nothing of that kind, and the worst of it is that it would mean a good deal of expense to father, which seems hardly fair."

"He won't grudge that," said Mrs. Boniface. "Your father would do anything to please you, dear. What is this plan? Let me hear about it."

"Well, the other night when I was hearing all about those poor Grantleys opposite to us—how the mother had left her husband and children and gone off no one knows where, and then how the father had forged that check and would certainly be imprisoned, I began to wonder what sort of a chance the children had in the world. And no one seemed to know or to care what would become of them, except father, and he said we must try to get them into some asylum or school."

"It isn't many asylums that would care to take them, I expect," said Mrs. Boniface. "Poor little things, there's a hard fight before them! But what was your plan?"

"Why, mother, it was just to persuade father to let them come to us for the five years. Of course it would be an expense to him, but I would teach them, and help to take care of them; and oh, it would be

so nice to have children about the house! One can never be dull where there are children."

"I knew she was dull at home," thought the mother to herself. "It was too much of a change for her to come back from school, from so many educated people and young friends, to an ignorant old woman like me and a silent house. Not that the child would ever allow it." "But of course, darling," said Cecil, "I won't say a word more about it if you think it would trouble you or make the house too noisy."

"There is plenty of room for them, poor little mites," said Mrs. Boniface. "And the plan is just like you, dear. There's only one objection I have to it. I don't like your binding yourself to work for so many years—not just now while you are so young. I should have liked you to marry, dear."

"But I don't think that is likely," said Cecil. "And it does seem so stupid to let the time pass on and do nothing for years and years just because there is a chance that some man whom you could accept may propose to you. The chances are quite equal that it may not be so, and then you have wasted a great part of your life."

"I wish you could have fancied Herbert White," said Mrs. Boniface, wistfully. "He would have made such a good husband."

"I hope he will to some one else. But that would have been impossible, mother, quite, quite impossible."

(To be continued.)

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