

BLACK IS WHITE

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CHAPTER XXIII—Continued.

"And I'm not so sure of that," said she, sagely. "It isn't the way that men. It may not have been love that he felt for the physical Yvonne, but it wasn't Matilde that he held in his arms. You can't get around that, nor can he. Matilde's soul and Yvonne's body are quite two different—"

"Gad, you are analyzing things!" he exclaimed in amazement.

"But all this is neither here nor there," she said, flushing. "The point is this: we are going away tomorrow, for heaven knows how long—you and I, my mother and your father. We are going to Vienna and in St. Stephen's cathedral—where your father and mother were married with poor little Therese as one of the witnesses—in St. Stephen's we are to be married. She will not be there. She is not asked to come with us. She is barred out. Isn't it the refinement of—cruelty?"

"Cruelty, Lydia? I'd hardly call it that. It's the order of destiny, or something of the sort. She gambled with fate and lost out. She's a good loser. She hasn't squealed once."

"Squealed? I hate that word."

"I hate squealer worse," said he. "But seriously, it knocks me all out whenever I think of her. I've hesitated about speaking to father, dear. You see, I'm in rather a delicate position. Six weeks ago I was madly infatuated with Yvonne. I don't deny it—and he knows all about it. Gad, I'd give ten years of my life if she were going along with us tomorrow. I'd give more than that to see this whole unhappy business patched up so that they could start off anew. But I'm afraid he wouldn't take it well from me if I asked him to include her in the—party. It's his affair, not mine, you see. He'd be justified in considering me selfish in the matter. It might seem as though I didn't care a hang for his personal feelings and—"

"She's his wife, however," said Lydia, with a stubborn pouting of the lips. "She didn't wrong him and, after all, she's only guilty of—well, she isn't guilty of anything except being a sister of the girl he wronged."

"I'll have a talk with him if you think best," said he, an eager gleam in his eyes.

"And I with Yvonne," she said quickly. "You see, it's possible she is the one to be persuaded."

"He'll never ask her," said Frederic, after a long period of reflection.

"What is to become of her?" asked Lydia, rather bleakly.

"I suppose she'll go away. It will be the end."

"I—I don't think I could bear it, Freddy," she said, a trace of tears in her voice.

He swallowed hard. Then he cleared his throat briskly. "Of course you've observed that they never see one another alone. They never meet except when someone else is about. He rather resents the high-handed way in which she ordered him to stay away from me until I was safely out of danger. He has spoken of it to me, but, for the life of me I can't tell whether he holds it up against her or not. He says she saved my life. He says she performed a miracle. But he has never uttered a word of thanks or gratitude or appreciation to her. I'm sure of that, for she has told me so. And she is satisfied to go without his thanks. She rather likes him the better for the way he treats the situation. There's no hypocrisy about him. There's no use shamming, Lyddy."

"I see what you mean," she said, with a sigh. "I suppose we just can't understand things."

"You've no idea how beautiful you are today, Lyddy," he said suddenly, and she looked up into his glowing eyes with a smile of ineffable happiness. Her hand found his and her warm, red lips were pressed to its palm in a hot, impassioned kiss. "It's great to be alive! Great!"

"Oh, it is," she cried. "It is!"

They might better have said that it is great to be young, for that is what it all came to in the analysis.

Later on Brood joined them in the courtyard. He stood, with his hand on his son's shoulder, chatting carelessly about the coming voyage, all the while smiling upon the radiant girl to whom he was promising paradise. She adored the gentle, kindly gleam in those one-time steady, steel-like eyes. His voice, too, of late was pitched in a softer key and there was the ring of happiness in its every note. It was as if he had discovered something in life that was constantly surprising and pleasing him. He seemed always to be venturing into fresh fields of exploration and finding there something that was of inestimable value to his new estate. Every day he was growing richer, happier—and yet poorer when it came to self-appreciation. All his life he had hoarded the motives and designs that applied to self. He had laid by a great store of hard things for his old age; they were being wrested from him by this new force that had taken possession of him and he saw how he had invested his powers. He had not invested very wisely and with

ever, was he in humility, conscience, remorse; on these three treasures he laid the foundation for his new fortune.

He spoke of the morrow without the faintest indication in his manner that it was to bring a crisis in his own affairs. His brow was clear, his eyes sparkling, his serenity undisturbed. If there was a thought in his mind of Yvonne he did not betray it by a single outward manifestation. His interest was centered in the two young people and their immediate future. It would have been easy to believe, as he stood there chatting gaily, that there was no one else in all the world so far as he was concerned. Quite casually he expressed regret that poor old Dawes and his wife were to be left behind, but of Yvonne not so much as a word.

Lydia was something of a diplomatist. She left father and son after a few minutes, excusing herself on the ground that she wished to have a good, long chat with Yvonne. She did not delay her departure, but hurried into the house, having rather adroitly provided Frederic with an opening for an intercession in behalf of his lovely stepmother. Her meaning glance was not wasted on the young man.

He lost no time in following up the advantage. "See here, father, I don't like the idea of leaving Yvonne out in the cold, so to speak. It's—it's pretty darned rough, don't you think? Down in your heart you don't blame her for what she started out to do, and after all she's only human. Whatever happened in the past—well, it's all in the past. She—"

Brood stopped him with an imperative gesture. "My son, I will try to explain something to you. You may be able to understand things better than I. I fell in love with her once because an influence that was her own overpowered me. There was something of your mother in her. She admits that to be true and I now believe it. Well, that something—whatever it was—is gone. It can never return. She is not the same. Yvonne is Therese. She is not the woman I loved two months ago. She—"

"Nor am I the boy you hated two months ago," argued Frederic. "Isn't there a parallel to be seen there, father? I am your son. She is your wife. You—"

"There never was a time when I really hated you, my son. I tried to—but that is all over. We will not rake up the ashes. As for my wife—well, I have tried to hate her. It is impossible for me to do so. She is a wonderful woman. But you must understand on the other hand that I do not love her. I did when she looked at me with your mother's eyes and spoke to me with your mother's lips. But—she is not the same."

"Give yourself a chance, dad."

"A chance? What do you mean?"

"Just this: You will come to love her for herself if only you will let go of yourself. You are trying to be hard. You—"

Again Brood interrupted. His face had gone very pale and his eyes grew dark with pain.

"You don't know what you are saying, Frederic. Let us discontinue the subject."

"I want you to be happy—I want—I shall be happy. I am happy. Have I not found out the truth? Are you not my beloved son? Are—"

"And who convinced you of all that, sir? Who is responsible for your present happiness—and mine?"

"I know, I know," exclaimed the father in some agitation.

"You'll regret it all your life if you fall her now, dad. Why, hang it all, you're not an old man. You are less than fifty. Your heart hasn't dried up yet. Your blood is still hot. And she is glorious. Give yourself a chance. You know that she's one woman in a million, and—she's yours! She has made you happy—she can make you still happier."

"No, I am not old. I am far younger than I was fifteen years ago. That's what I am afraid of—this youth I really never possessed till now. If I gave way to it now I'd—well, I would be like putty in her hands. She could go on laughing at me, trifling with me, fooling me to—"

"She wouldn't do that!" exclaimed his son hotly.

"I don't blame you for defending her. It's right that you should. I, too, defend her in a way. You are forgetting the one important condition, however. She has a point of view of her own, my son. She can never reconcile herself to the position you would put her in if I permitted you to persuade me that—"

"I can tell you one thing, father, that you ought to know—if you are so blind that you haven't discovered it for yourself. She loves you."

"My son, you are dealing with a graver mystery than you can possibly suspect—the secret heart of a woman."

"Well, I'm sure of it, father—I am absolutely sure of it."

"You speak of giving yourself a chance. Why do you put it in that way?"

"Because it's the truth," proclaimed

his son. "You've missed a good many things, father, because you never gave yourself a real, honest chance. I—"

"We'd better drop the subject, Frederic," said Brood, an abrupt change in his manner. "There is nothing more to be said. Matters have shaped themselves. We will not attempt to alter them. I cannot reconstruct myself in a day, my boy. And now, let us talk of Lydia. She—"

"All right, but bear this in mind: Lydia loves Yvonne, and she's heart-broken. Now we'll talk about her, if you like."

Lydia had as little success in her rather more tactful interview with Yvonne. The incomprehensible creature, comfortably ensconced in the great library couch, idly blew rings of smoke toward the ceiling and as idly disposed of her future in so far as it applied to the immediate situation.

"Thank you, dear. I am satisfied. Everything has turned out as it should. The wicked enchantress has been foiled and virtue triumphs. Don't be unhappy on my account, Lydia. It will not be easy to say good-by to you and Frederic, but—la, la! What are we to do? Now, please don't speak of it again. Hearts are easily mended. Look at my husband—al—e! He has had his heart made over from top to bottom—in a rough crucible, it's true, but it's as good as new, you'll admit. In a way, I am made over, too. I am happier than I've ever been in my life. I'm in love with my husband, I'm in love with you and Frederic and I am more than ever in love with myself. So there! Don't feel sorry for me. I shall enter my virtuous days in peace, but I shall never sit-by-the-fire, my dear. Tomorrow you will go away, all of you. I shall have the supreme joy of knowing that not one of you will ever forget me or my deeds, good and bad. Who knows! I am still young, you know. Time has the chance to be very kind to me before I die."

That last observation lingered in Lydia's mind. Hours afterward she thought that she had solved its meaning and her heart was sore.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I Cannot Come to Him." The next day came, bright and sweet, and as fair as a blue sky could make it for one who looked aloft. But eyes are not always turned toward the unclouded sky. There are shadows below that claim the vision and the day is bleak.

The ship was to sail at noon.

At ten o'clock the farewells were being said. There were tears and heart-aches—and there was fierce rebellion in the hearts of two of the voyagers. Yvonne had declined to go to the pier to see them off and Brood was going away without a word to her about the future! That was manifest to the anxious, soul-tried watchers. In silence they made their way out to the waiting automobile. As Brood was about to pass through the broad front door, a resolute figure confronted him. For a moment master and man stared hard into each other's eyes, and then, as if obeying an inflexible command, the former turned to glance backward into the hallway. Yvonne was standing in the library door.

"Sahib!" said the Hindu, and there was strange authority in his voice. "Tell her, sahib. It is not so cruel to tell her as it would be to go away without a word. She is waiting to be told that you do not want her to remain in your home."

Brood closed his eyes for a second, and then strode quickly toward his wife.

"Yvonne, they all want me to take you along with us," he said, his voice shaking with the pent-up emotion of weeks.

She met his gaze calmly, almost serenely. "But of course, it is quite impossible," she said. "I understand, James."

"It is not possible," he said, steadily, his voice with an effort.

"That is why I thought it would be better to say good-by here and not at the pier. We must have some respect for appearances, you know." She was absolutely unmoved.

He searched her eyes intently, looking for some sign of weakening on her part. He did not know whether to feel disappointed or angry at what he saw. "I don't believe you would have gone if I had—"

"You need not say it, James. You did not ask me, and I have not asked anything of you."

"Before I go," he said nervously, "I want to say this to you: I have no feeling of resentment toward you. I am able to look back upon what you would have done without a single thought of anger. You have stood by me in time of trouble. I owe a great deal to you, Yvonne. You will not accept my gratitude—it would be a farce to offer it to you under the circumstances. But I want you to know that I am grateful. You—"

"Go on, please. This is the psychological moment for you to say that your home cannot be mine. I am expecting it."

He straightened up and his eyes hardened. "I shall never say that to you, Yvonne. You are my wife. I shall expect you to remain my wife to the very end."

Now, for the first time, her eyes flew open with surprise. A bewildered expression came into them almost at once. He had said the thing she least expected. She put out her hand to steady herself against the door.

"Do—do you mean that, James?" she said wonderingly.

"You are my property. You are bound to me. I do not intend that you shall ever forget that, Yvonne. I don't believe you really love me, but that is not the point. Other women have not loved their husbands and yet

—yet they have been true and loyal to them."

"You—you amaze me," she cried, watching his eyes with acute wonder in her own. "Suppose that I should refuse to abide by your—what shall I call it?"

"Decision is the word," he supplied grimly.

"Well—what then?"

"You will abide by it, that's all. I am leaving you behind without the slightest fear for the future. This is your home. You will not abandon it."

"Have I said that I would?"

"No."

She drew herself up. "Well, I shall now tell you what I intend to do—and have intended to do ever since I discovered that I could think for myself and not for Matilde. I intend to stay here until you turn me out as unworthy. I love you, James. You may leave me here feeling very sure of that. I shall go on caring for you all the rest of my life. I am not telling you this in the hope that you will say that you have a spark of love in your soul for me. I don't want you to say it now, James. But as sure as there is a God above us you will say it to me one day, and I will be justified in my own heart."

"I have loved you. There was never in this world anything like the love I had for you—I know it now. It was not Matilde I loved when I held you in my arms. I know it now for the first time. I am a man. I loved you—I loved your body, your soul—"

"Enough!" she cried out sharply. "I was playing at love then. Now I love in earnest. You've never known love such as I can really give. I know you well, too. You love nobly—and without end. Of late I have come to believe that Matilde could have won out against you—your folly if she had been stronger, less conscious of the pain she felt. If she had stood her ground—here, against you, you would have been conquered. But she did not have the strength to stand and fight as I would have fought. Today I love my sister none the less, but I no longer fight to avenge her wrongs. I am here to fight for myself. You may go away thinking that I am a traitor to her, but you will take with you the conviction that I am honest, and that is the foundation for my claim against you."

"I know you are not a traitor to her cause. You are its lifelong supporter. You have done more for Matilde than—"

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"Within these four walls," said he, and his face was very white.

"Is that your sentence?"

"Call it that if you like, Therese."

"Do you mean that I am not to put foot outside of these premises?" she asked, wide-eyed. He nodded his head. "My keepers? Who are they to be? The old men of the sea—"

"Your keeper will be the thing you call Love," said he.

"Do you expect me to submit to this—"

He held up his hand. "I expect you to remain here until I return, Therese. I did not intend to impose this condition upon you by word of mouth. I was going away without a word, but you would have received from Mr. Dawes a sealed envelope as soon as the ship sailed. It contains this verdict in writing. He will hand it to you, of course, but now that you know the contents it will not be necessary to—"

"And when you do come back am I to hope for something more than your pardon and a release?" she cried, with fine irony in her voice.

"I will not promise anything," said he, slowly.

She drew a long breath and there was the light of triumph in her eyes. Laying her slim hand on his arm, she said: "I am content, James. I am sure of you now. You will find me here when you choose to come back, be it in one year or twenty. Now go, my man! They are waiting for you. Be kind to them, poor souls, and tell them all that you have just told me. It will make them happy. They love me, you see."

"Yes, they do love you," said he, putting his hands upon her shoulders. They smiled into each other's eyes. "Good-by, Therese. I will return."

"Good-by, James. No, do not kiss me. It would be mockery. Good luck and—God speed you home again!" Their hands met in a warm, firm clasp. "I will go with you as far as the door of my prison."

From the open door she smiled out upon the young people in the motor and waved her handkerchief in gay farewell. Then she closed the door and walked slowly down the hallway to the big library. She was alone in the house save for the servants. The old men had preceded the voyagers to the pier. Standing in the center of the room, she surveyed this particular cell in her prison with a sort of calm disdain.

"He has taken the only way to conquer himself," she mused, half aloud. "He is a wise man—a very wise man. I might have expected this of him." She pulled the bell cord, and Jones, who had just re-entered the house, came at once to the room.

"Yes, madam."

"When Mr. Dawes and Mr. Riggs return from the ship, tell them that I shall expect them to have luncheon with me. That's all, thank you."

"Yes, madam."

"By the way, Jones, you may always set the table for three."

Jones blinked. It was a most unusual order. He had been trying to screw up his courage to inquire what his mistress' plans were for the immediate future—whether she intended to travel, should he dismiss the servants, would she spend the heated term in the mountains, etc., etc. He, as well as the rest of the servants, wondered why the master's wife had been left behind. Her instructions, therefore, to lay three places at the table took him completely by surprise—"knocked the breath out of him," as he expressed it to the cook a few minutes later. She had never been known to take a meal with the garrulous old men. They bored her to distraction, according to Celeste. And now he was to lay places for them—always! It was most extraordinary!

A cold, blistery night in January, six months after the beginning of Yvonne's voluntary servitude in the prison to which her husband had committed her. In the big library, before a roaring fire sat the two old men, very much as they had sat on the December night that heralded the approach of the new mistress of the house of Brood, except that on this occasion they were eminently sober. On the corner of the table lay a long, yellow envelope—a cablegram addressed to Mrs. James Brood.

"It's been here for two hours and she don't even think of opening it to see what's inside," complained Mr. Riggs, but entirely without reproach.

"It's her business, Joe," said Mr. Dawes, pulling hard at his cigar.

"Maybe some one's dead," said Mr. Riggs, dolorously.

"Like as not," said his friend, "but what of it?"

"What of it, you infernal—but, excuse me, Danbury, I won't say it. It's against the rules, God bless 'em. But I will say that if anybody else had asked that question I'd say he was a blithering, unnatural fool. If anybody's dead, she ought to know it."

"But supposing nobody is dead," protested Mr. Dawes.

"There's no use arguing with you."

"She'll read it when she gets good and ready. At present she prefers to read the letters that just came from Freddy and Lyddy. What's a cablegram compared to the kind of letters they write? Answer me, Joe."

"Foolish questions like that—"

"Haven't you had letters from them? You've been tickled to death over their happiness and their prospects and—"

"That doesn't prove that they're not dead or dying or in trouble or—"

"Maybe it's from Jim," said his friend, a wistful look in his bleary old eyes.

"—I hope it is, by gee!" exclaimed the other, and then they got up and went over to examine the envelope for the tenth time. "I wish he'd telegraph or write or do something, Dan-

She's never had a line from him. Maybe this is something at last."

"What puzzles me is that she always seems disappointed when there's nothing in the post from him, and here's a cablegram that might be the very thing she's looking for and she pays no attention to it. It certainly beats me."

"You know what puzzles me more than anything else? I've said it a hundred times. She never goes outside this house—except in the garden—day or night. You'd think she was an invalid—or afraid of detectives or something like that. God knows she ain't a sick woman. I never saw a healthier one. Rain or shine, winter or summer she walks up and down that courtyard till you'd think she'd wear a path in the stones. Eats like a soldier, laughs like a kid, and I'll bet she sleeps like you, she's so fresh and bright-eyed in the morning."

"Well, I've got this to say, Joe Riggs: she has been uncommonly decent to you after the way you used to treat her when she first came here. She's made you feel everlastingly ashamed of your idiotic behavior—"

"I beg your pardon, Danbury," exclaimed Mr. Riggs, striking the table with his bony knuckles so violently that the books and magazines bounced into the air. "Don't you ever say anything like that again to me. It's against the rules for me to call you a scoundrelly liar or I'd do it in a second."

"For your sake, sir, I'm glad it's against the rules," said Mr. Dawes, fiercely. "I'm mighty glad."

Mr. Riggs allowed a sheepish grin to steal over his wrinkled visage. "I apologize, Danbury."

"And so do I," said his friend, whereupon they shook hands with great cordiality—as they did at least a dozen times a day since the beginning of the new regime.

"She's the finest, loveliest woman on earth," said Mr. Riggs.

"I never knew I could be so happy as I've been during the past six months. Why, this house is like a bird cage filled with canaries. I sometimes feel like singing my head off—and as for whistling! I haven't whistled for years till now. I—"

"Sh!" hissed Mr. Riggs, suddenly backing away from the table and trying to affect an unconcerned examination of a worn spot in the rug.

Mrs. Brood was descending the stairs, lightly, eagerly. In another instant she entered the room.

"How nice the fire looks," she cried, crossing the room. Never had she been more radiantly, seductively beautiful than at this very instant. "My cablegram—where is it?"

The old men made a simultaneous dash for the long-neglected envelope. Mr. Dawes, being fat and aggressive, succeeded in being the first to clutch it in his eager fingers.

"Better read it, Mrs. Brood," he panted, thrusting it into her hand. "Maybe it's bad news."

She regarded him with one of her most mysterious smiles. "No, my friend, it is not bad news. It is good news. It is from my husband."

"But you haven't read it," gasped Mr. Riggs.

"Ah, but I know, just the same." She deliberately slit the envelope with a slim finger and held it out to them. "Read it if you like."

They solemnly shook their heads, too amazed for words. She unfolded the sheet and sent her eyes swiftly over the printed contents. Then, to their further stupefaction she pressed the bit of paper to her red lips. Her eyes flashed like diamonds.

"Listen! Here is what it says: 'Come by the first steamer. I want you to come to me, Therese. And see! It is signed 'Your husband.'"

"Hurrah!" shouted the two old men. "But," she said, shaking her head slowly, "I shall not obey."

"What! You—you won't go?" gasped Mr. Riggs.

"No!" she cried, the ring of triumph in her voice. She suddenly clapped her hands to her breast and uttered a long, deep sigh of joy. "No, I shall not go to him."

The old men stared helplessly while she sank luxuriously into a chair and stuck her little feet out to the fire. They felt their knees grow weak under the weight of their suddenly inert bodies.

"But, Mrs. Brood, he wants you!" came almost in a groan from the lips of Mr. Riggs.

She lighted a cigarette. "If he wants me, Mr. Riggs, let him come and get me," she said sending a long cloud of smoke toward the ceiling as she lay back in the chair and crossed her feet in absolute, utter contentment. "He will come, my dear old friends—oh, I am sure that he will come."

"You—you don't know him, Mrs. Brood," lamented Mr. Dawes. He's made of steel. He—"

"He will come and unlock the door, Mr. Dawes," said she, serenely. "He is also made of flesh and blood. The steel you speak of was in his heart. It has been withdrawn at last. My friends, he will come and get me—very soon. Ring for Jones, please."

"What—what are you going to do?" Mr. Dawes asked the temerity to ask.

"Send a cablegram to my husband saying—"

She paused to smile at the flaming logs, a sweet, rapturous smile that neither of the old men could comprehend.

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