

TWO CHRISTMASSES;

OR,
THE MYSTERY OF THE HAUNTED GARRET.

CHAPTER V. (CONTINUED).

His chest heaves as he listens—as he looks up at me with his passionate wet eyes.

"If I had only been satisfied with her love! But I made my life a misery to myself and her because I could not have all I wanted. I neglected her who loved me for the sake of a woman who would not care if it was I who was lying dead there in that room to-night!"

"People always reproach themselves afterwards," I answer gently, passing by the allusion to myself. "It always seems as if we might have been kinder to them, done more for them, been more with them, while we had them. But they know how we loved them—now."

"I do not blame you," he says, with the same strange look—"I do not blame you. No woman can make herself care for a man just—just because he asks her to do it!"

"Do not let us talk of that," I say as quietly as I can. "That is all over." "Yes," he echoes; "it is all over. Don't you think I know it?"

His tone of absolute renunciation would have broken my heart if I had not felt, though I would not speak of it now, I had only to let him see how much I cared for him to make him as intolerably happy as he is now full of despair.

"Where is Leslie?"

"I do not know. I never thought of her." He has come to me in his agony, not to Leslie—no—another. The thought thrills through me with a pleasure so keen that it is almost pain.

"Joan, do you think me a poor, weak, miserable fool? But you don't know how much I have suffered—how this grief has been choking me—all these months!"

"I—I knew you were not happy; and—and I pitied you, Hugh."

"You are an angel, to pity me who have cost you so much!"

"I am afraid I have cost you more."

"But you could not help it. I was a fool to think you could."

"I will not have you call yourself a fool!"

"I will try not to make you sorry, Joan," he goes on, with a strange smile. "I will be your friend, if you will let me—I will try to care for things as I used. Sometimes I have felt ready to kill myself, but that is all over. I saw to-day what a short thing our life is at the best, how soon it is gone. It is not worth while to fret because one cannot have this or that—death comes, and the dream is ended; and, if it is happy or not, what matter? It is only a watch in the night."

He pauses, looking at me with that strange smile on his shadowy face. I think his grief has bewildered his brain a little.

"Shall we be friends, Joan, as we used to be long ago?"

"I am your friend, Hugh—always your best of friends."

"And you forgive me—for all my folly—and for having taken—that place from you? I never wanted it, Joan, never thought of it, as there is a heaven above me! I thought you cared for me before I spoke those words to you that day in the wood."

"I believe it," I say soothingly, for his manner frightens me. "I knew that long ago—don't let us speak of it any more."

"Not after to-night. I will never trouble you with my sorrows after to-night. But I want to tell you that I will try to be as I used—that I will be satisfied with your friendship—that I will not go about like a madman because you can never feel for me as I feel for you—that, as you remain single for another's sake, so will I remain single for yours, satisfied if you will only look at me now and then, only speak a kind word to me, as you do to the sick folk up-stairs."

The less he claims, the sadder I feel, or should feel if I did not know how quickly I could bring him to my feet again.

"And now I must go," he says, bending his head suddenly to kiss the hand he has been holding—the hand still wet with his tears. "Good-night, dear, and do not fret for—her or for—for me. She is at rest, and I—I shall be happy enough, I dare say, by-and-by."

I do not like to let him go, he seems so bewildered by his grief. But before he leaves me at the garden gate the cool sweet air seems to revive him a little, and I hope the walk home will do him still more good. There is nothing like a long walk to calm even the excitement of grief.

As for me, I sit still in the darkness for a long time, thinking of poor Aunt Wills. Then my thoughts go back to Laurie, and I wonder how it is that I never felt the same passionate thrill when Laurie said he loved me as I feel now when I think of Hugh's quiet renunciation. Perhaps it was because I love Hugh with a love ten thousand times greater, ten thousand times more passionate, than any I had ever felt for the boy lying in Bournemouth churchyard? False to the dead as I feel myself, traitor to my own self-inflicted vows, I yet glory in the knowledge that never did I know what love meant until now.

When my little maid brings in my lamp at ten o'clock, she finds me still sitting in the window.

"Did you hear the news from Grayacre, ma'am? Mrs. Tressilian is dead?"

"I know. Mr. Tressilian came over to tell me."

"Died off quite suddenly," the girl goes on, breathing hard with the importance of her relation. "Was sitting up in her bed quite lively-like, when all in a minute she fell back, and was dead before they could get Mr. Hugh in from the farm-yard!"

Poor Aunt Wills!

I go up-stairs to my neat formal bedroom, with its varnished floor and newly-painted wood-work and trim, simple furniture, ranged as precisely as in the ward beyond; and, as I open my dressing-case, a little strip of paper falls out, and half unconsciously I open it and read:—

"When thou shalt love
In the sweet pangs of it, remember me."

CHAPTER VI.

The funeral is over. Grayacre returns to usual sunny quiet, the picturesque old house standing up among its green hedges and trim flower-beds as peacefully and pleasantly as if no drawn blinds had lately betrayed the presence of death under its red-roof, no funeral procession passed away on its open door. I have seen Hugh resilliant several times, Leslie once or twice at the funeral. Leslie seems sorry for aunt, but she is busy with her new

mourning, writing to London for patterns of crape and black stuffs, and having Miss Bayley the dressmaker up from the village every day.

Hugh's grief for his mother is very deep. He never speaks of it—has never alluded to her since the evening of her death; but I see it in his changed looks, in the listless way in which he moves about—he who used to be so active and energetic—in the small interest he takes in anything about the place. He comes over to the hospital and sits with me by the hour together, looking into the twilight garden, seldom speaking, never retreating in any way to what took place there in that other twilight, never speaking of either his love or his calm renunciation of that love, or treating me as anything but the friend he had asked me to be to him—a friend whose society seems to comfort him, he seeks it out so constantly, though he so seldom speaks.

He believes I do not care for him, I had told him I hated him on that day in the fir wood, and he took me at my word; and I—I love him as I never thought I could love again. Again I love him as I never loved before. I knew it on that evening he threw himself at my feet, while his head was on my lap, his tears and kisses were on my hands. Fool that I was and blind not to have known it long ago, and saved both myself and him these weeks and months of pain!

But he loves me, resolutely as he strives to hide it; I see it in the very coldness of his averted eyes, hear it in the very tones of his calm indifferent voice. And some day the tide of passion will leap the bounds he has assigned to it. Some day he will fall at my feet again and tell me that he cannot bear it, that he must speak, though it should banish him out of my sight forever. And then—I shall bend over him—then I shall look at him with eyes full of pity and love—then he shall know that I love him, and that he need not go.

One evening he walks back with me as far as the hospital, Leslie and the Doctor leading the way, Leslie chattering away to her companion quite gaily, though I know she would rather have walked with her cousin, Hugh and I silent for the most part; and yet perhaps I am the happiest of the four, in the glad consciousness that the grave silent man beside me loves me,—met with my pale face and sad eyes, and, Leslie Creed, with the fresh glad beauty of her seventeen years.

It is a mile from the Rectory, which is on our side of the village, to the hospital, so that Hugh and Leslie are coming out of their way to walk with me. We have passed through the village and are walking slowly up the road in the moonlight, under the great elms and beeches which overhang it hereabouts, and Leslie and the doctor are out of earshot when Hugh says, quite calmly and collectedly—

"I have something to tell you, Joan—something I would rather tell you myself than have you hear it from a third party."

"You are not going away?"—with a sudden sharp misgiving.

"Not for a little while. But I am going to be married."

"To be married?"—"Yes. And I suppose you can guess to whom?"

"I cannot guess!" I exclaim, utterly dumfounded.

"To Leslie. I thought you would have known. Every one seemed to take it for granted—long ago; and he laughs a little strangely. "Why don't you congratulate me, cousin Joan?"

"I—I hope you will be very happy," I say blankly. "I—I am glad you told me."

I am glad the merciful shadows hide my face.

"She says she always cared for me," he goes on monotonously. "It was my poor mother's wish—she told me so on her death-bed. I could not help myself, Joan, could I?"

What can I say but that he could not?

"She has no place to go to—not a friend or relative but myself, I may say in the world—and she could not stay at Grayacre, or come back with me to La Hougue Bic, unless—unless as my wife. You know that?"

Of course I know it, though I had never thought about it before.

"It seems people are talking already," he goes on in the same hard, monotonous voice. "I ought to have known it—I did know it; but what could I do? I could not send the girl out to look for her uncle in Burmah or back to school in New York! And I could not marry one of the old Misses Jones to enable Leslie to stay at Grayacre, could I?"

"Scarcely."

"So you see I did the only thing left for me to do in the circumstances—I asked Leslie to marry me."

"I—I am sure she will—make you happy."

"I don't know about that. I don't think I was born to be happy somehow. But she will be happy, which is of more consequence. I—I should like to make the child happy for—my mother's sake."

I know not what answer to make to this, so make none.

"I came over this evening to tell you. You are my—my friend, Joan, and I—I think you care for me—a little. You will be glad to know that I have done what I—what I think to be right."

"Very glad, dear Hugh."

My heart is ready to burst, but I speak calmly, and the shadows of the thick elms hide the exceeding misery in my face.

"I thought I should never marry, for your sake, Joan. It is for your sake that I have broken my promise. You—will be glad to think I tried to—to please her."

I know he means his mother—"and you will not be unhappy any longer about—me."

"Unhappy about you?"

"You thought I was fretting—I knew it by the way you looked at me. But I shall not fret any longer, and you will be satisfied then, Joan; you won't reproach yourself any more for—for what you could not help."

Reproach myself! Shall I ever cease to reproach myself to the last day of my life? We have reached St. Perpetua's by this time; Doctor Nesbitt and Leslie are waiting for us. Leslie kisses me, wishing me good night; I give one look at her glad young face, more lovely than ever in the moonlight, and then I turn to Hugh.

"Good-night," he says quietly, holding my hand closely for a moment; and, as he drops it, I feel that it is not only good night, but good-bye.

Shall I ever forget the anguish of that night?

I thought I had felt sorrow before, the sense of utter loss, of loneliness, of disappointment; but, compared with this agony, they were as pin-pricks. It astonishes me now to think how I could have felt them at all.

Leslie, pretty Leslie, with her blue eyes and baby-curly and charming dimpled face—Leslie, who had half a dozen lovers in the village already, to have robbed me of a nine! She will be his wife, he will be her husband, hers to guard her and keep her, in sickness and in health, as long as they both live! I dare not even think of him—him whom I loved yesterday with all the strength of my being, with every fibre of my heart. Jealousy is cruel as the grave, but remorse—remorse is more cruel still. When he loved me, how had I treated him? When he would have taken me in his arms, how had I thrust him away, how called him harsh names in the vehemence of my indignation, how seen him suffer day after day for all these weary weeks and months! It was love for me which changed his face, which robbed him of all his old energy and spirit—the love which I would die to call mine now, now that I have flung it away for ever!

The anguish of the thought almost drives me mad. Oh, Hugh, my love, my love! And I behaved so vilely to you, so shamefully, so cruelly, while you were dying for me!

The wedding is to take place early in October, and is to be a very quiet one because of the recent mourning. Leslie does not half like the idea of being married at eight o'clock in the morning in her travelling-dress, but with a good grace she resigns herself to the inevitable. One of the Misses Jones plays "propriety" at Grayacre and sometimes Kathleen Carmichael, who is as great a friend of Leslie's as Anne is of mine, spends three or four days there; but I go over very seldom, being kept hard at work with my sick folk, and feeling besides that Leslie cannot miss me very much while she has Kathleen with her and is so busy with her wedding finery.

There is a great deal of sickness in the village—there generally is at the time of the falling leaves. Grayacre lies low for the most part, and is surrounded by reedy meadows called the Inches, stretching on each side of the river as far as the moor; and from these dense mists and foggy exhalations rise in the evening, especially in the autumn, when the air is heavy and still. We have five or six cases of pneumonia in our wards, which keep me fully occupied; and it is well for me that they do, otherwise I think my heart would break.

Hugh never comes to St. Perpetua's—I scarcely ever see him, except when riding backwards and forwards to the neighboring town now and then, or in church. I suppose he blames me for having treated him so badly—I suppose he is learning to forget me and not only to forget me, but to dislike me, as all men do the women who have behaved to them as I behaved to him.

One evening in the beginning of September I find myself at liberty for an hour or two, and, not having been near Grayacre for three weeks or more, I think I ought to walk over there, if I do not want Leslie to suspect the pain and jealousy which are eating out my heart. So I put on my quaint bonnet and long cloak, and set out with my old dog Fritz to walk to the farm.

It is a calm autumnal evening, very still and quiet; the sun is slipping towards the west, but it is high in the sky yet—it will not be dark for fully two hours, and then there will be the harvest moon. I enjoy the sweet smell of the reaped harvest-fields, of the dying leaves and bracken; there is a soft blue haze under the trees and in the hollows, in the meadows the after-grass is as green as an emerald, by the meadow paths the meadow-sweet raises its spires of fragrant creamy blossom, the nuts are ripening in the hedge. I now where the best nuts grow, and the crab-apples and sloes and wild cherries, as well as any boy or lad about the place.

I find Leslie in the blue room, with Kathleen Carmichael and Doctor Nesbitt, the two latter practising a duet, Leslie playing the accompaniment. They seem very happy and merry. Leslie looks as pretty as ever in her fashionably-made gown of black cashmere with crape bands and puffs, and jet ornaments in her pretty ears; and on her slim white arms. Kathleen Carmichael is a plain, sensible kind of girl, with red hair like her sister's and a freckled complexion. Doctor Nesbitt is a tall young fellow, ruddy-skinned and fair-haired, rather good-looking, with a flaxen moustache. I think he admires Leslie, and I do not think it is quite wise of her to let him come to Grayacre so constantly, or quite kind either. He is a very young man, not more than two or three and twenty, and, though Leslie is engaged to Hugh Tressilian, she is pretty enough and vain enough to make a fool of Algernon Nesbitt. She seems glad to see me, and welcomes me in her pretty cordial way, taking off my cloak and bonnet and finding a pleasant chair for me, and sending for tea. I am tired, not so much from the walk as from the nursing I have had, and perhaps my own heart-weariness, and when the greetings are over, I send them all back to the piano and lean back in my chair, listening to the voices and the music, and listlessly turning over the pages of a magazine which has been lying on the sofa near me.

"My worst weakness was to love you so—so much too well—so much too well or ill—yet even that might have been pardoned still; it would have been had I been you, you I—"

But now—good-bye!

"How soon the bitter follows on the sweet! Could I not chain your fancy's flying feet? Could I not hold your soul, to make you play To-morrow in the key of yesterday?"

Dear, do you dream that I would stoop to try? Ah, no—good-bye!

My tears are dropping upon the page, the words are blurred—the words of heart-break which I might have written, they are so exactly the echo of my daily and nightly moan. I am sitting quietly in my chair, my elbow resting on the arm of it, my forehead on my hand, when somebody comes and lifts the book from my knee.

"Hugh!"

"What are you crying about, Joan? I never saw you cry before but once! Surely you are not shedding tears over a book!"

"Give it to me, Hugh—please!"

"Not till I see what has touched your hard heart, cousin!"

"Tears are quite a luxury sometimes," I say carelessly; "I—I only wanted an excuse to cry this evening. I have been—worn out—lately."

"Yes—I know. You are doing a good work, Joan—a great many blessings follow you."

If I sigh, it is not because I do not value the blessings; but I think I shall profit by them in another place than Grayacre.

"You look like the ghost of yourself!" he goes on, still considering me closely. "I have not seen you for a long time, you know, except at church in the evening. You have grown thin and your eyes are hollow. Who will nurse you when you are obliged to knock under?"

"I hope I shall not be obliged to do that. Our sick folk are all recovering?"

"It is when the anxiety and excitement and necessity for exertion are over, that you will feel the effects of all you have gone through."

"Do not try to frighten me"—smiling slightly.

"I know your stout heart, Mistress Joan. If you were a little more afraid, it might be better for you."

(TO BE CONTINUED).

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