

MY MARRIAGE.

What Trouble a Lack of Confidence Brought a Foolish Wife's Country.

Christmas is over—the first Christmas I have spent from home since I was a girl...

I have chosen two of the prettiest and brightest bed-rooms, and with Mrs. Steele's help, they are made pictures of luxurious comfort...

Humphrey laughs at my plans, but I think he looks a little sad too. And one evening he says, half smiling, half serious...

"I shall be nothing to you with me, when he is as good as dead," putting his hands on his shoulders as he speaks. And then his laughs at the pitiful dismay in my upturned face...

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CHAPTER XVII.

"Only three days, and Bee and Lena will be with me. We are at breakfast, Humphrey and I. The post-bag has just come in, and behind the great silver urn I am reading a letter from Bee—a long letter, full of wild delight at the prospect of coming to Carstairs; and she gives a graphic and amusing description of Lena's dread that their wardrobes will not be considered fashionable enough for the gay neighborhood...

"Madge," what has happened? Humphrey asks. And I look up and feel myself growing white to the lips. "Bee is ill. I must go to her," I say slowly and with difficulty. And, without speaking, Humphrey takes the letter from my hand and reads it through.

"Scarlatina! Have you had it, Madge?" "No, I think not." And then I get up. "How soon can I go to her, Humphrey?"—looking up to him with a sort of dumb appeal, for something tells me if I go to Bee it will be against my husband's wish. And I set my lips together firmly when his low-breathed steady words come.

"I must! Don't try to stop me, Humphrey." He paces to prepare himself for the conflict of will against will; but he is very calm and quiet yet.

"Madge," he says again trying to speak earnestly, but looking at my face all the time to see the effect of his words. "What do you say to a trip to New York?" "To New York? I wish, with eyes opening in amazement. "What do you mean, Humphrey?"

"He looks down at the letter in his hand, and then up at me again. "I have an old friend named Grant dying in New York of consumption. This letter is from him; and he asks me, as a last favor, to come and see him before he dies, and to be a guardian to his only sister, poor fellow."

"I listen blankly to his explanation, and then turn my eyes away from my husband's face. "Humphrey must you go?" "He gets up and comes over to me. "Listen, child. When I was ill in London, years ago, with no friends, no one to care if I lived or died, Grant nursed me almost night and day for two months, and worked himself to a shadow to procure wine and luxuries for me. Don't you think I ought to go? We shall not be away more than six weeks or two months."

"We"—with a gasp in my voice. Do you mean that I am to go, Humphrey?" "Yes," he says, gravely and sternly, and puts his dying friend's letter into my hand, and then walks away to the window, while I read the faint blotted handwriting, the last touching appeal of man to man, and heart to heart.

"Slowly I read the letter, and slowly I hold it up. "Humphrey, I think you ought to go," I say in a tearful voice, with a stress on the "you" which he cannot fail to understand.

"He does not answer immediately. I look over at his tall figure standing in the window, and wonder what he is thinking of and why he does not speak. The silence becomes unbearable, and I break it at last, timidly and uncertainly.

"Bee and Lena will be so disappointed, Humphrey, would you mind if I stayed at home with them?" "He turns round suddenly. "Growth Madge, do you mean to drive me mad? And then, as I rise to my feet and stand smiling dumb with wild frightened eyes at the first withered words that have ever passed his lips to me, he cries out, with something like a sob in his voice, "Child, child, you will break my heart."

"I do not speak—I only look back at him, with fast-moving tears and gasping, catching breath. Did I know glad at the prospect of being alone at Carstairs, with my sisters for company? Perhaps I showed gladness in my face. I was hardly conscious of even feeling one throbb of pleasure at the prospect; but Humphrey's jealous passionate eyes are keen. Tears roll down my cheeks.

"Madge, Madge, where is all your bravado? Why don't you know it is your duty to leave me to hear the pitiful street on the word 'duty' as it falls from his lips. "My duty? I father with a throbb of pity for us both, and go one step nearer to him. "Your wish must not fall in that, Humphrey."

paper and left a blistered stain. Humphrey looks sorrowfully at my wood-begone hair. "Madge darling, it won't be so long after all; and then you can have the girls for the whole summer if you like."

"I will tell you when the time comes. And now, my child, I want to start the day after to-morrow. Can you be ready?" "Yes," I answer, with a lump in my throat, but very resolute and determined to say I would be ready in half an hour if he so willed it.

There is a great deal to be done, and Mrs. Steele is at her wits' end; and with a pang I begin giving orders for the dismantling of the two pretty rooms that have been gotten ready for Lena and Bee—boxes are packed, and the whole house is in confusion. Chris Delacourt comes over and offers to do anything in his power.

I think our neighbors believe we are crazy for flying off to America to see a dying man; and the day before our departure we are besieged with visitors. Nobody seems to believe that we are actually going. The house has a deserted air already.

The morning is raw and cold, and the air outside is heavy. Drops hang from every bare black branch and twig, and the world has a saddened look that would be depressing if I had time to think about it. The postman is coming up the avenue. I expect a letter from home, and go out into the hall myself to take the pile of letters and papers from Bernard. Tossing them all down by Humphrey, I seize an envelope bearing mamma's handwriting, and, tearing it open, see a few scrawled lines, evidently written in a great hurry; and I read, with a wild beating at my heart, that Bee—my darling Bee—is ill—scarlatina, the doctors say.

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Bees, out of the window, and my word passed that I am not to go to her, unless it is for a last good-bye.

The remainder of the day drags with leaden hours. Humphrey's grave face is a constant reproach. Once I am tempted to say, "I will go with you, Humphrey," but I cannot bring my lips to utter such words; and my boxes are carried up to my room again, and I see Hester laying my things back in the wardrobe.

"I don't like leaving you here alone, Madge," Humphrey says, as the time drags very near for his departure. "I wish George Delacourt were here, she could have stayed with you while I am away."

But George is away on a visit having beaten a cowardly retreat and left the field clear to Sir Jasper Vane. "I shall not mind being alone," I say bravely. "And I dare say George will be home before you Humphrey."

"My husband's spirit's get lower and lower as the hour of his departure draws near. One little act shows his kind heart and his love for me. Shortly before it is time to start, he calls me into the library and hands me a cheque for one hundred pounds.

"For Bee," he says. "I know what an expensive thing an illness is." "Humphrey—how kind!" I say, with a mist of tears in my eyes and a swelling at my heart.

"He listens to my faltering thanks, holds on to his arms, and I know the time is come to say good-bye, and I cling to him—sobbing. "Humphrey, I know I ought to have gone with you. You say forgive me before you go."

"Good-bye, my wife—my darling!" His voice is not like his own. "Haven't you said, Madge! Good-bye!" A few minutes afterwards I am standing alone, white and tearful, and Humphrey is gone.

Bee's illness turns out to be very slight, and in a week's time she is out of danger. It is the very mildest form of scarlatina. Isabel and Regy take it too, equally lightly.

I am dreadfully lonely, and the days seem interminable. My first letter to Humphrey causes me much thought, especially how to address him—"Dear Humphrey" looks formal, but I have written it down, and there it stays; and the orthoedox ending, "Your affectionate wife," looks strangely cold. It is a very short letter; but I don't know what to say; and there is a whole half sheet staring me in the face in its spotless purity. I read my letter over again, and it seems stiffer and more stilted than ever. So over the blank half sheet I write, "I do miss you very much, Humphrey."

I know long afterwards that he kissed that little sentence again and again, and that the postscript was the only part of the letter he cared to read—the few words in which I told him that I missed him.

And I do miss him every hour of the day—for time hangs heavily on my hands, and the house is dreadfully, painfully still. Humphrey's own room, with the unfinished pictures standing against the wall, looks dreary in the extreme. I miss the form I am so accustomed to see sitting at the case, but always looking up with a smile when I appear. I long—yes I absolutely long to hear Humphrey's voice, for a sight of his gray eyes—the eyes that are always full of sympathy for me.

I must be getting fond of him, I say to myself, or I should not miss him so much; and then I think it is only because I am lonely that I miss his presence and put imaginary cases to myself.

Which would I rather see arrive—Humphrey or Bee. I know that I would a thousand times rather hear Bee's merry voice than my husband's deep tender tones.

Humphrey or Lena? There is a little doubt here, but Lena carries the day. Humphrey or Helen? I think that Humphrey would get the gladder welcome.

And so the scale of my affections runs thus—I like Humphrey nearly, but not quite as well as Lena. Though better than Helen. But oh, how immeasurable low is my standard of love for him compared with my love for Bee!

With Bee's returning health my spirits revive, and the sickening anxiety of post-time abates. I can eat and sleep now, and cease to start at every knock, believing every sound to be a summons to call me. Mrs. Steele is very anxious about me, and comes repeatedly to see how I am getting on. She scolds me as if she finds me crying.

"For illness, ma'am, is a dispensation of Providence. Tears wont make the young lady well; and your own health is to be considered." But Bee is out of danger now. The weather is fine—a mild green winter it is—and weather prophets foretell a white March. So I go out into the world again, accept an invitation to lunch at Ripley, and find that Captain Delacourt is home on leave.

I think every one is a little surprised at my not going with Humphrey; and I fancy that the outward world regards my anxiety about Bee as an excuse to stay at home.

"So you were afraid to cross the sea, Mrs. Carstairs?" says Captain Delacourt. "I don't wonder; at this time of year it is far more comfortable on shore."

"I was not afraid," I answer. "But how could I go when my sister was ill?" "He smiles, and says in a low voice. "We are the gainers; and it would have been selfish of Carstairs to take you away when winter is the gayest time here."

"I will be anything you like," I answer. "Mrs. Steele told me that there used to be a trunk full of old brocade—silks and all kind of antiquities at Carstairs; but she is not sure where the box is. I intended to search for it when my sisters came. Perhaps the things would be of use for the tableaux."

"Captain Delacourt looks delighted. "The very thing. Mrs. Carstairs. It is a mercy that you did not go to New York."

After luncheon, every book in the house is searched for suitable subjects for tableaux. Chris declares himself incapable of giving any assistance.

"I am awfully hazy about history and all that sort of thing. Don't ask me to suggest anything about books. Have something modern, Clive—Arrival of Shah," says he.

"Don't bother, Chris." Captain Delacourt has a sheet of paper and a pencil to write down anything that is thought of. He has a number of books around him.

Mrs. Delacourt suggests wild impossible scenes from the Waverley Novels, which are negatived immediately by her dutiful son Clive.

"We must have something tragic, and a few desperately sentimental scenes; those are the only tableaux that are in the least effective," he says.

"The Huguenot?" suggests Chris, his eyes lighting on the pictures on the wall. "What do you say to that Clive?" "Captain Delacourt looks up, also. "The Black Brunswicker?"

"But who will take those characters?" says Chris, in his lazy honest way. "No girl would stand like that with a fellow unless she knew him very well."

"Oh, hush!" cries Captain Delacourt. "Leave me to choose the characters, Chris, and they will be all right."

"Wouldn't Elaine make a pretty tableaux?" I say, looking over Tompion's. "Yes, lying on the barge; or it would be better to have her polishing the shield. That would be less hackneyed," Captain Delacourt returns.

"So Elaine goes down on the list, and we progress swimmingly. "Have something with a soldier in it. Your uniform would come in handy, Clive."

This is another idea from Chris, brought up as usual, after long deliberation. "By Jove, yes! Good idea that, Chris! Mrs. Carstairs suggests something with a red coat in it."

"Our combined thought results in a scene with a dead soldier and angels hovering round. "An awfully jolly idea!" Captain Delacourt declares. "But how we are to get the angels I do not know. The girls in this region are simply frightful! Mrs. Carstairs, will you be an angel? But I think I have you in every tableau, and it is hardly fair to give you so much to do."

"Beauty and the Beast." This is also from Chris, who seems to have a fertile imagination. "You and your husband," Captain Delacourt says quickly, and then colors crimson. "Oh, I beg your pardon! I don't mean anything. Mrs. Carstairs; but Carstairs is such a big fellow, with a beard and all that, and of course there could be no one more suitable than yourself to act Beauty."

"Of course not," I say, laughing. "Have Beauty and the Beast if you like. I am sure Humphrey would not mind it."

"We need not decide upon them all to-day," Chris observes. "We have lots of time, and ideas may come to us."

CHAPTER XVIII.

With the wind in my face and the keen air causing a thrill of exhilaration, I am speeding over a wide common, leaving Peter on the brown horse far behind.

The Ranger has not been out for a week, and he is in wild spirits to-day; and no sooner does he feel the close short grass under his feet than he is off, and I let him go for a mad gallop, which sobers him a little, and then I draw bridle and glance back to see Peter in the dim distance.

The sea looks cold and blue to-day, and I can feel the briny air on my face, and against the horizon I see a horseman approaching; and when he gets near enough I see that it is Captain Delacourt mounted on a gray horse. He takes off his hat, smiling.

"Good morning, Mrs. Carstairs. Was your horse running away just now?" "No!" I answer indignantly. "I could have pulled him up if I liked."

"I saw the whip snatched across the Ranger's shoulder. Away we go, and Captain Delacourt is soon after me. It is a race for the next five minutes; and then I pull up, and we look into each other's faces and say no more.

"Ah, no, it is never a cloud in the blue sky, never a sigh in the wind, never a note of storm and breakers ahead, never a voice to say 'Beware,' to whisper of danger."

"I say 'Good-bye' to Captain Delacourt, and nod a smiling farewell; and on the morrow I meet the gray horse and his rider again; and laugh at the incident, looking at the Captain with world-innocent eyes.

"How strange that we should meet again!" I say, and know not now, but afterwards, that he has been watching and waiting for the last hour.

Day after day we ride together; and I find him a gay, pleasant companion, always ready to amuse, always agreeable. I laugh and talk, and the hours go by pleasantly enough. And long afterwards I know that my husband set his teeth hard under his moustache at one little sentence in a letter of mine—I go out riding with Captain Delacourt every day."

"I see no harm in it. Ignorant of the world's ways, utterly innocent of the conclusions that might be drawn from my conduct, I allow Captain Delacourt to be my companion day after day, riding out with him alone.

"I can take care of you, Mrs. Carstairs," he says one day. And so Peter is saved the trouble of doing escort duty, and Captain Delacourt takes care of me instead.

Humphrey writes regularly. Every week brings a long letter from him, every word breathing his passionate love for my own worthless self; and I get to know my absent husband better by these letters of his than I have learned to know him all the months we have lived together.

I read that he is thinking of me every hour of the day, that he is longing and hungering for the time that will bring him home again, home to the wife who has no love for him, back to the heart that has never beaten for him or any man yet.

Poor Humphrey! I press my lips to his letter for I am fond of him after a fashion—and when I write to him, and say I wish he were at home again, it is no falsehood, for I do mean it. His friend Grant is getting weaker and weaker, dying day by day; and his sister is to be left in Humphrey's charge. My husband writes a great deal about these two, brother and sister; and I wonder what Felicia Grant will be like, for he is to bring her home with him after her brother's death. It will be only for a little while; but I am sorry, I do not like strangers; and this Felicia Grant I have never seen.

And then comes a letter which says Mr. Grant is dead, and that Humphrey and his ward are to leave New York by the next steamer.

"My husband is coming home," I say with a grave smile, looking not at Captain Delacourt, but straight between my horse's ears.

"We are riding side by side over the stretch of common which spread far away on either side and widens out beyond till it meets the gray horizon. A row of tall elms stand up against the sky, and far behind us lie the great sea.

"The gray horse is brought a shade slower. "When is he coming?" "In less than a fortnight; and Miss Grant is coming with him. Her brother is dead, and Humphrey is her guardian."

"I say it all slowly and gravely, for I am sorry that Felicia Grant is coming. And then I look up and see my companion's eyes fixed on mine.

"What are you thinking of Mrs. Carstairs?" he says. "I wonder if our thoughts are the same?" "I am sure they are not," I answer; "for I was wondering if I shall like Felicia Grant."

"And I," he says quickly, "was wondering if our pleasant rides were to come to an end."

"Our rides—why?"—looking at him with wide-open eyes. "Your husband will want to ride with you yourself," he says, a little color rising to his face.

"Humphrey never rides," I rejoin, not in the least detecting his meaning, for that my husband might object to my constantly having Captain Delacourt for a companion, never once enters my head.

"Carstairs might not approve of your riding with me so often"—laughing as he speaks; and I laugh too. "Oh, what nonsense! My husband will only be too glad to have any one to take such good care of me."

He sighs, and his face gets very grave. [To be Continued.]



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