

IN CUPID'S NET.

BY BERTHA M. CLAY, AUTHOR OF "DIANA'S DISCIPLINE," "A BROKEN WEDDING-RING," "THORNS AND ORANGE-BLOSSOMS," "DORA THORNE," &c. &c.

CHAPTER I.

No matter what the Christmas stars shone or the Christmas snow fell, there was not in the whole world so desolate a girl as I. I had watched them, these fair stars, shining in a deep blue sky, in a different clime from this—a clime where roses grow and birds sing all the year round, and the silver stars are rarely ruffled by storms. I had watched them from between high gray walls, which I know now to have enclosed the court of a convent; and since then I have watched them from the grand old gardens of Heron's Nest. All through my lonely, desolate childhood, uncheered by the warmth and the brightness of the sun of love, the stars were as friends to me.

I remember, as in a dream, a journey over stormy seas; I hear far-off echoes of a voice; and I have a faint recollection of a face bending over mine. But the first vivid impression of my life is of standing at the window of the housekeeper's room at Heron's Nest, watching the shadows grow darker and the snow fall one Christmas Eve. There was no rejoicing in the grand old mansion. It was all dark and dismal. The snow beat fiercely upon it; the wind sobbed round it; but loud and sweet above the moan of the wind came the chiming of the church bells. To me they spoke plainly enough. They said, "Christmas is come—Christmas is come!" I wondered if they said the same to every one else. I spoke to the only friend I had, Mrs. Paterson, the housekeeper.

"What do the bells of Heronsdale Church really say?" I asked her.

"Bells do not speak," she replied, smiling. "You cannot say they are dumb." I rejoined, "Listen!" and slowly I sang with them, "Christmas is come—Christmas is come!"

Mrs. Paterson shook her head. "Gracia," she said, not unkindly, "you are too full of fancies."

"To tell you the truth," I answered, "I hardly know what are fancies and what are not. Is it a fancy of mine that because it is Christmas Eve the snow falls more softly and the stars shine more brightly? Is it a fancy that puts real music into the chiming of the bells—that fills the air with a strange sense of mystery?"

"Gracia," said the housekeeper solemnly, "you had better go to bed."

"Oh, no!" I cried. "Do not send me away. It is cold and dark in my room. Let me stay here in the warmth and light with you. I want to watch the sky and see if the Christmas stars shine to-night."

She murmured to herself a wish that Heaven would bless the child and her fancies, but she was not angry.

"How fondly mothers will kiss their children to-night!" I went on. "How warmly will old friends clasp hands! If one man has wronged another, how freely he will be forgiven! I wish some one would kiss me."

"I will kiss you, Gracia," said the housekeeper.

And she did; but it did not seem to satisfy the craving that I felt.

"Are you not happy here?" she asked kindly.

"How can I be happy when I belong to no one, when I have not a friend or relative in the world—when I have not even a name?" I said bitterly.

"You live in a beautiful house, you wear good clothes, and have everything a girl can wish for," she said abruptly.

"I want none of those things," I cried. "I want some one to love me."

"I have made a plum-pudding and some mince-pies," said Mrs. Paterson, with a view to diverting my thoughts. "You shall have a hot mince-pie for your supper, Gracia, if you will stop talking. You almost frighten me."

But plum-pudding and mince-pies had no charms for me. I loved the pale moonlight, the softly-falling snow, the light of the stars. I longed to go out and see if I could penetrate the mystery that seemed to be around. I wanted to hear more distinctly the bells that seemed to chime "Christmas is come—Christmas is come!"

That is my first vivid recollection. How the fair clime where the roses grew, how the high gray walls had disappeared, I could not tell. Here I was, a child of ten, and no one had the slightest knowledge about me. No one knew why I was at Heron's Nest; no one knew my parents, my name, my position. I might be the daughter of a peer or a peasant, I had not a friend. In the whole world there was not a more lonely child than I.

Every one called me "Gracia"—the housekeeper, the old butler, the head-gardener, the Vicar, his wife and daughter; I had no other name. When any one said abruptly, "Gracia, what?" I was obliged often to ask, "May I ask your name?"—I could not answer. "Gracia" the simple name—nothing but "Gracia"!

The keenest of all pains to me was having no name; and when I read the story of the shadowless man, I believed that I understood what he had suffered. I was part of the place, just as the pictures and statues and carvings were; and a grand old place it was, too.

The Squire who owned Heron's Nest at the time of my first memories of the place was called Wolfgang—a name of which, though not by any means an attractive one, he was very proud, because many of his ancestors had borne it; and of this Wolfgang Dacre a story was told. When a young man, he spent a season in London, and there fell madly in love with a Court beauty, said to be one of the loveliest women in England. He had not the least chance of winning her, for she was a Duke's daughter and a great heiress; she was a coquette too, false of heart as fair of face. The handsome young Squire, who worshipped her as though she were a goddess, made a very agreeable addition to her list of admirers. She had no intention of marrying him; but she enjoyed the pleasant pastime of flirting with him, and revelled in the sport. She liked to see the young man's face pale with emotion, flush with anger or love, just as she willed. She delighted in exercising her power over him, making his honest heart thrill with rapture, then sink with despair. He was the favorite of all her admirers; but she never thought of marrying him. True he was of ancient descent, his name one of the oldest in England, his wealth great; but then he was only a country Squire, and she was a Duke's daughter. She accepted his homage, smiled upon him until her beauty almost maddened him, wore the flowers that he sent her, let him clasp her hand until every nerve in his frame thrilled with delight at the touch, swayed with him when the very sweetness of the music dazed him; but she never dreamed of marrying him. Had any one suggested such a thing, she would have been indignant. When the day came that Wolfgang Dacre laid all he had in the world at her feet, she laughed at him and held him up to derision. He left London then, never to return. He shut himself up in the old manor-house, a man whose life was embittered for ever by the light love of a woman.

There he lived for some years. Lady Millicent married, and the tragical story of her death a little later created a great sensation. Soon after that, he went abroad, leaving his beautiful home in the care of Mrs. Blencowe, his housekeeper. Twice every year Mr. Graham of Tharves Inn, the Squire's solicitor, went down to Heron's Nest and remained

for a week, during which time he thoroughly examined the books and ordered all the accounts, attended to the accounts, and made all arrangements for the next six months. Occasionally—but it was a rare event—a letter came from the Squire to the housekeeper; no one else however ever knew the nature of the contents. Everything went on from year to year in the same monotonous, quiet, peaceful way. Gradually the memory of the Squire died from the minds of his people; and then I came upon the scene, whence no one at Heron's Nest or in the neighborhood could tell.

It seems that one fine April morning a letter came for the housekeeper, Mrs. Blencowe. After she had read it, she called the servants together, and told them she was compelled to go away for a time, as a friend of hers was ill and required her services. The housekeeper made her arrangements, attended to all that would be required during her absence, and then departed.

She returned when the June roses were blooming, bringing me. I was six years old when I came with Mrs. Blencowe to Heron's Nest. She never spoke to the other servants about me. She called Gracia, and no one knew whether it was my own name or not—I was simply Gracia. So far as I remember, she was very kind to me.

At Heronsdale there lived a gentle, simple old man, the organist of the church, Michael Holt. He taught me music and the rudiments of Latin, and made me acquainted with the beauties of English literature—taught me for several years simply for love of me; for two years after she had brought me to Heron's Nest the housekeeper died suddenly. She was standing on the steps in the library, dusting some valuable books, when she fell down dead. The doctor who was summoned said the cause of her death was disease of the heart—disease of long standing. So I lost the only person who knew anything about me.

After she was dead, people did what they had never dared to do in her lifetime—they put innumerable questions to me. What did I remember—what had I seen? Where had I lived abroad—in what town? Was Mrs. Blencowe my mother, or was she my aunt? But I remembered nothing clearly, except the roses and the high gray walls; therefore I could not gratify their curiosity. It was possible that Mrs. Blencowe might be my mother, yet a proud instinct told me she was not. I was penniless, friendless, living at Heron's Nest on sufferance; yet I was proud as the daughter of any peer, and I do not believe that I ever lowered my head for any one.

No sooner was Mrs. Blencowe dead than there was quite a disturbance about me. Some of the servants said that the Squire's solicitor ought to advertise for Mrs. Blencowe's friends. He did so, and they came forward; but none of them knew anything of me.

It was suggested that I should be sent to the workhouse or to an orphanage; but Mr. Graham would not hear of that.

"The Squire would be angry," he said. "After all, the child will not cost much; she had better stay here for the present. I do not know the Squire's address, or I would write and ask him what is to be done with her."

Then a new housekeeper came—Mrs. Paterson; and she was as much mystified as the rest with regard to me. She was kind, and it takes a long time to get used to a new housekeeper. My own little sleeping-room at the top of the house, whence I caught a glimpse of the sea, was my only refuge, and during the next week I lived almost entirely there.

At last I heard that the Squire had come. I had pictured him always as he was in his portrait—smiling and handsome; but I had failed to allow for the havoc that years of sorrow and pain make.

It seems that for some days no one mentioned me to the master of the house, nor did he make any inquiries about me.

One night, when I believed the whole household to be asleep, I went quietly down to the library to get a book, one of Richard Proctor's, called *Other Worlds than Ours*—a book in which I read.

There was no one there. I found my volume, and went back to my room with it; but a bow of pink ribbon had appeared in my hair. As the Squire passed through the room early in the morning, he saw it lying on the carpet, and he picked it up. Just at that moment one of the housemaids entered the room.

"To whom does this belong?" the Squire asked her.

"To Gracia, sir," answered the maid.

She told me of the thing afterwards, and said that when the Squire heard the name he recognized it, but he had received a blow.

"Whom?" he cried, in a loud voice.

And the maid repeated—

"Gracia."

"Send the housekeeper to me," said the Squire, after pacing moodily for some minutes up and down the room.

Mrs. Paterson hastened to him, uncertain whether she was to hear praise or blame.

The Squire, when she entered the library, was standing before the great bay-window. He turned to her abruptly.

"I understand you have a young person named Gracia here. Who is she?"

"No one knows, sir," was the reply. "I found her here when I came, and she is here still."

"How did she come here?" was the next question.

"I cannot tell, sir. I have heard the servants say that the late housekeeper was called Gracia, but I was absent some time, and returned with the child. I do not think any one in the house knows who she is."

A look of relief passed over the Squire's face.

"But that is improbable—impossible, I may say. Some one must know!" he exclaimed.

"To begin with, sir, I do not," returned the housekeeper, with a dignified air. "As Gracia had been in charge of the former housekeeper, I look her under my protection. Mr. Graham said he was sure that you would not like her to be taken to an orphanage or a workhouse. No one owned her, though we all believed her to be Mrs. Blencowe's daughter."

She paused for a moment, while the Squire paced up and down the room angrily. At length he came to a stand-still, and said abruptly—

"Send to me all the old servants in the house."

So the butler, the head-gardener, all the old servants who were at Heron's Nest before I came, were called before the Squire; but not one amongst them knew anything more than this—that Mrs. Blencowe, after being absent for some time, had returned with me; but whence she had brought me no one could tell.

Was it anger or relief on the Squire's face when they were dismissed, and he stood thinking so deeply? At last he rang the bell again, and, when one of the footmen answered it, he said—

"Tell Mrs. Paterson to send the young person Gracia to me."

Mrs. Paterson brought me the message herself.

"Gracia," she said, "and do not be afraid. Let the Squire hear you sing, and he will put you in the way of making a fortune, I am sure."

But I went in fear and trembling to the library, where the Squire awaited me. I found myself in the presence of a tall, stately gentleman, whose hair was white as snow, and whose face, though marked by lines of terrible pain, was still handsome, with the fire of his blue eyes undimmed. But they were no longer laughing eyes; they were stern, and cold, not at all like the eyes of the portrait. What was it that flashed into me when they fell upon me? I could not tell. Was it surprise, fear, love, or what? I do not know; but it was a look such as I have never seen on any human face since.

Before I had time to answer, he asked quickly—

"I, for my own part, do not believe that you are Mrs. Blencowe's daughter; but who you are is a mystery I cannot solve."

The words delighted me. It was the first time that any one seemed to think it possible that I might not be Mrs. Blencowe's daughter.

"The Squire is coming home," Mr. Graham continued hurriedly. "I do not know on which day he will arrive; but it will be some time next week."

"Do you think he will let me remain here?" I asked eagerly. "Does he know that I am here?"

"I cannot answer either question," he replied. "The Squire has never mentioned you in his letters. I wrote to him when Mrs. Blencowe died, and said that you would stop at Heron's Nest, unless I heard from him to the contrary; but he did not answer that letter."

"What shall I do?" I asked despairingly.

"Do nothing," he replied. "Keep out of his sight for a time. I wish I could be here when he comes, but I go to Scotland to-morrow, and shall not be here for some weeks. I have no doubt that he will do something for you."

I felt more puzzled than ever that day as to who I could possibly be. I must be of good birth, I thought, for everything about me betokened race. But to what family did I belong? Ah, that was a mystery!

There was great excitement in the household when it was known that the master was returning. Mr. Graham remained only a few hours. The housekeeper had told him about my singing, and he sent for me to ask me to sing to him. I did so. When I had finished my song, he looked at me thoughtfully.

"You need have no fear for the future, Gracia," he said; "you have a fortune in your voice. I have heard none more beautiful."

"A fortune!" I repeated dreamily; and then he occurred to me that I had never in my life had a shilling that I could call my own.

He spoke very kindly, telling me that sooner or later something must transpire with regard to my parentage, that I was to take courage, and that he would always be my friend.

Nothing was spoken of now but the coming of the Squire. Quite an army of servants suddenly appeared; trim housemaids, cooks, footmen, and grooms, all seemed to spring into existence. The state rooms in the great mansion were thrown open, the picture-gallery was set in order. There I saw a portrait of the Squire when he was quite a young man; and my wonder was that the Lady Millicent Branscombe could have resisted him, he looked so gallant and handsome. I loved the face, and when I looked at it I said to myself that the owner of those eyes would be my fate.

There was a gleam in the bright blue eyes that promised well; but then the picture had been painted before he saw the Lady Millicent.

Within three days after the announcement of the Squire's return Heron's Nest was quite another place. It seemed to me a fitting abode for a prince. Now there was less room than ever for me. I could not mix with the crowd of servants in the hall; my feeling and instinct were against it. Into the music-room I dared not enter. My favorite place, the library, was closed against me. My own little sleeping-room at the top of the house, whence I caught a glimpse of the sea, was my only refuge, and during the next week I lived almost entirely there.

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ing steadily at the other; then he started, sighed deeply, and shuddered. "He came a step nearer to me, then drew back; finally he had me approach him. He looked into my eyes as though he would read my soul, and then said slowly—

"Nothing more?"—"Yes," I replied.

"Nothing more?"—"Yes," I replied.

I had to pause, my heart was beating so fast. I wondered what was stealing over me. My eyes filled with tears; the sound of his voice seemed to stir the depths of my soul.

"I thought," he said slowly, "that Gracia was a child."

"I was a child not long since," I answered; "now I am growing up—yet helpless as when I was a child."

"And who are you?" he asked.

"Always that same cruel question! I raised my eyes, blinded as they were by tears, to his face.

"I do not know," I answered. "No one knows who I am. The happy birds have a home; but I have none."

"Heron's Nest has been a home—has it not?" he asked gently.

"No one can have a home who has neither friend nor name," I returned bitterly.

"And you—"

"Have neither," I interrupted.

He looked at me for some moments in silence, then asked—

"How old are you, Gracia?"

"Seventeen," I replied.

"Tell me," he said hesitatingly, "what you remember of your past before you came here."

"It is so little that it is hardly worth telling," I answered. "I remember first being near the sea, in a land where roses grew even to the water's edge; and I can recall a face that used to bend over mine."

"I saw the color leave his lips."

"Nothing more?" he asked sharply.

"Then I recollect high gray walls—convent walls I know they were, because I remember the sisters' faces—a stormy passage across the sea, and my arrival here. It was only when I reached Heron's Nest that I really seemed to come to life."

"Did Mrs. Blencowe know your history?" he asked suspiciously.

"I believe not."

"She let fall no hint which might have proved a clue to your parents?"

"No," I replied. "I might have dropped from the clouds for all that any one seems to know about me."

"I mentioned something I could not hear distinctly, but it sounded like 'Poor child! Does it not strike you as a very strange thing that I should return home and find in my house a young lady—how tall and delicate!—who has been living here for years, and of whom no one knows anything?'"

"I do think it strange; and what is more, I think it cruel," I answered. "I must have had parents, like other people. It is to Heaven they must answer for their neglect of me."

He was still looking at me intently.

"Do you know," he said, "what you are a very beautiful girl?"

My heart beat with pleasure. No one had ever told me so before, and I knew so little of the outside world that I could hardly tell whether I was beautiful or not.

"Yes," continued the Squire, "you are beautiful as—"

"And what education have you had?" he asked.

"I gave him a list of my acquisitions, and told him that Michael Holt had taught me all I knew. Long afterwards I heard that he had presented Mr. Holt with five hundred pounds, without however assigning any motive for doing so. Then I ventured to say that Mrs. Paterson had wished me to sing to him, adding modestly that I thought I might, with a little assistance, be able to earn my own living."

He smiled. Ah me, I shall never forget the beauty of that smile! It changed his face altogether.

"We shall see," he said. "Let me hear you sing, Gracia."

(To be continued.)

Ex'g the Text.

Another stone memorial is stored in the corridors encircling the court of the Pekin university, which adjoins the Confucian temple. This is a series of no less than two hundred noble slabs of black marble, like upright gravestones, each twelve feet in height. On these are engraved the whole of the classics—i. e., the thirteen books of Confucius. It appears that by some extraordinary accident there was once an emperor of China so depraved as to attempt to destroy every existing copy of this source of all wisdom. There is no doubt his early years had been imbittered by the study of those wearisome volumes, and when, on his accession to the throne, he was expected to expound their doctrine to all his officials and mandarins, his soul was filled with a wild desire to commit them, once for all, to the flames. Perhaps, if he had succeeded, he might have relieved his country from its mental bondage to the example and teacher of all eyes. He failed, however; but in case such another Herod should ever arise, it was decided that these words of wisdom should be preserved on imperishable marble, which, moreover, should forever insure the Chinese characters in which they are inscribed from any change. So, round a great court, known as the hall of the classics, are ranged these tall, solemn marble tables—embodiments of the dead weight wherewith the present is here hampered by the past; and here, once a year, the emperor is obliged to give that lecture the very thought of which so distracted his ancestor—*Over and.*

Business is Business.

Young Bilkins was utterly devoted to business, but somehow found time to fall in love; and ask the girl to marry him. The time was set, and he called on the old gentleman to get his consent. He had a long talk, and that evening came up to see the girl.

"Well," she said, in considerable anxiety, "what did pa say?"

"He said that wheat was going up and there was a fine chance for a man to make a handsome little dot."

"Shaw! Didn't he say anything else?"

"Oh, yes, we talked about a dozen ventures that might be made, with an excellent chance of coming out ahead every time."

"Better the business! What did he say when you asked him if you could have me?"

"He said that wheat was going up and there was a fine chance for a man to make a handsome little dot."

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"Shaw! Didn't he say anything else?"

"Oh, yes, we talked about a dozen ventures that might be made, with an excellent chance of coming out ahead every time."

According to the official report, just issued, there are six times as many lunatics in Paris as there were in 1801. A curious fact is that down to the year 1836 the number of female lunatics exceeded that of the male, but since that date the men have predominated in an increasing ratio, and now supply nearly 56 per cent. of the total, against about 44 per cent. of women patients. The numbers of the married and the single are almost exactly equal. Excessive drinking and domestic trouble are responsible for about 60 per cent. of the cases.

Ike Pitkins writes to the Detroit *Free Press* denying that the bite of the tarantula is necessarily fatal. The tarantula will not bite unless he is cornered, and though his sting makes one sick for a few hours, it is not always fatal. A man in San Antonio was bitten by a tarantula and was in bed one day, and suffered from the pain two or three days, but was never in any danger.

CALL ON H. S.