

INCUPID'S NET.

BY BERTHA M. CLAY, AUTHOR OF "DIANA'S DISCIPLINE," "A BROKEN WEDDING-RING," "THOMAS AND ORANGE-BLOSSOMS," "DORA THOLINE," ETC.

(Continued.)

He went to the piano, which stood at the other end of the room, and opened it. "Who taught you music and singing?" he asked.

"The man who has taught me everything else," I answered—"Michael Holt."

On the day before I had found a beautiful little poem, and the words had pleased me so much that I set them to music. I did not now stop to think whether the verses were suitable or not, but sang them.

"Those words are those?" the Squire asked, when I had finished.

"I told him."

"And whose music is it?"

"And I answered him—oh, so proudly!—that the music was mine."

"You're?" he questioned, in surprise. "You must be clever! Sing something else that you have set to music."

"This time the song was quite different; it was a more lively air. When I finished a cry of delight fell from the Squire's lips as the first notes died away."

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "A girl who can compose such music need not despair."

Then I took courage, and, looking into his face, asked the question that had been hovering around my lips from the moment I first saw him.

"Squire Dacre," I said, "no one knows anything of me; tell me, do you know who I am?"

I saw that for one moment at least the question paralyzed him; but he soon recovered himself.

"If I could solve the mystery," he returned slowly, "I should not need to ask all the questions I have put to you."

To my mind his evasion of the truth was painful and perceptible. If he had answered me frankly—"Yes, I should not perhaps have dared to ask more. If he had said 'No,' I should have believed him. As it was, I felt that he had evaded my question. From that moment a stronger conviction that the Squire knew who I was—knew, in fact, my whole history—took possession of me."

"You hope then, Gracia, to live by your music?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes," I answered quietly.

"We will see what can be done. I must think matters over," he said. "You seem to have read a great deal."

I looked round the grand old library with considerable pride.

"Yes," I replied; "I have read most of the books in this room, many of them two or three times."

"We must have a chat about them some day," he said. "I have almost forgotten what books are here—I have been away so many years."

He repeated the final words softly to himself—"So many years?"

From that I gathered faintly I was not to be driven from Heron's Nest because its master had returned.

"In the meantime, sir, will you tell me what to do?" I asked. "I cannot mix with the servants. Find me a place in your household where I shall not be forced to associate with them."

"His lips quivered."

"I will think over it," he said slowly. "Meanwhile be patient, Gracia, be patient. I will see you again."

And that, I knew, was an intimation that I might go. I went; but life was not the same for me again—I felt so sure that the Squire knew my whole history.

CHAPTER III.

"Gracia, how did you get on with the Squire?" "Are you going away?" "Does he know anything about you?"

Such were the questions that assailed me the whole of the day. From Mrs. Paterson down to the lowest handmaid in the place. None of the servants resented the fact that I did not care for their society, and I could not but admit that their curiosity was only natural. They all wanted to know what the Squire had said when he found that a young girl had been brought up in his household without his knowledge; but I felt that all their interest was kindly meant.

It was I myself who felt so strange. I was sure the Squire knew something of me that he would not tell. I had read it in his eyes. Perhaps I was the daughter of some old friend of his; but, if so, why all this secrecy? There was no need for it. My heart and my head ached more than ever with the burden of the question, "Who am I?"

I thought the Squire would be dignified, and avoid me; but, to my surprise, on the morning following our conversation in the library he sent for me. This interview differed from the last; he did not look at me or question me so much.

"I gathered from what you said to me yesterday, Gracia, that you have been accustomed to live by the library?"

"Yes," I answered; "it was my one place of refuge."

"And I have taken it from you?"

"You are master here; it is your right," I answered.

"Then I will be a generous master, for I will give up my right to that room to you."

It was not merely the kindness of his words that affected me; it was the tacit acknowledgment of our social equality. These words proved to me that I was not the daughter of one of his servants. He would not have offered the use of his library to Mrs. Paterson or to any of her relatives. My heart beat proudly as I recognized the supreme importance of this fact to myself.

"I should not like your studies to be interfered with, Gracia," he went on, "especially if you wish to make any progress in music. Let us make this arrangement, I pass my mornings out of doors, and my afternoons with my books. I will leave you the mornings, and you can spend the time in the way you like best."

This from the proud Squire of Heron's Nest! He was never proud to me after that.

During the next three days I saw him frequently, and it struck me that his face always wore a look of anxious brooding care, as though in his mind he were debating some weighty matter.

Ah, how I longed to throw myself upon my knees at his feet, and ask him to solve the mystery that shrouded me! He could do it; I felt sure he could!

On the evening of each of these three days he sent for me to sing some of my own compositions to him; he professed himself delighted.

"What a gift you have, child!" he said. "Your name will be famous one of these days."

"Do you really think so?" I asked eagerly.

"I am sure of it, although I may not live to see that day."

"But you look strong," I said; "you are not old, though your hair is white."

"I have lived," he answered, "for many years with a racking wound in my heart. The day will come when I shall die of it, and I care not how soon."

There grew up a strange intimacy between us. We were so near together, yet so far apart. At times I read love in his eyes, at others something like aversion.

He came into the library on the second day after our arrangement was made, and found me engrossed in the intricacies of one of Chopin's difficult pieces. He stood for a few minutes behind my chair; then with his own hands he lifted mine from the keys and looked at them.

"You have beautiful hands, Gracia," he said—"the very hands for music." He looked at them until his eyes were dim with tears.

Every time I saw him, every hour I passed with him, deepened the mystery that lay between us. One day I was out in the garden, attending to some favorite flowers, when he came up to me.

"You like hollyhocks, Gracia?" he said.

"Yes," I answered, "very much. I love those verses in which Tennyson has enshrined them."

"Does it ever occur to you," he asked, "how exact Tennyson is in his description of a thing? How accurate that one line—'How heavily hangs the hollyhock!'"

It does hang heavily. See how it bends with its own weight. Do you remember another line of his—

"Black as ash-buds in March?"

I smiled to myself when I read it. I was in a distant land then; but I remembered how black the ash-buds were. Few other poets to my mind, chose words so wisely or so well. I learned some grim lessons through him."

Had he loved a Guinevere or a Vivian, I wondered, that he should say that?

I entered the picture-gallery one morning, and found him there. He was walking up and down, his face wearing its usual expression of deep thought and anxious consideration. After greeting me, he said rather abruptly—

"Gracia, do you like money?"

"I find that a very difficult question to answer," was my reply. "For the simple reason that I have never had any."

"Tell me, dear," he continued, laying his trembling hands on my shoulders, and seeming quite to forget the difference and the distance between us, "would you like to be rich—to have money, houses, and land?"

"After a moment's thought, I answered—"I would far rather have some one to love me than have all the riches in the world."

"Poor child!" said the Squire tenderly. "If," he went on, after a pause, "you could have your choice between wealth and love, you would choose love?"

"I am sure of it," was my quick reply. "I have lived in the world for seventeen years, and no one has loved me yet. My heart hungers for love."

"Poor child!" he said again; and after that he seemed more thoughtful than before.

Another morning I found him in the library, writing busily. He looked up when I entered, and smiled.

"This is a terrible breach of our agreement," he said. "You must excuse me this one morning. Gracia, I have something that I must do. I wonder," he added, in a dreamy tone, "what happens me to write it to-day. Do not go," he said, as I turned to leave the room. "You will not disturb me; on the contrary, I feel that I shall write better for seeing you. Sit down to your books, Gracia."

I did as he bade me—took my books into the sunny bay-window, and read, pausing now and again to glance at the Squire.

My eyes, as I read, fascinated, followed his movements. I saw in an open secret private drawers in his escritoire, drawers that were evidently known only to himself, from which he took one or two letters. When he had finished the long epistle he was writing, he looked up, and said—

"Gracia, will you send Mrs. Paterson and James Gryston to me? I want them to witness this." He did not say what this was, but I saw a sheet of parchment, closely written over. "Come back when they are gone," he added.

It struck me that, when the housekeeper and the butler reappeared, they each looked very important; but they said nothing, and I went back to the library, as the Squire had told me.

I remember, just as though it had happened yesterday, every detail of what followed.

The Squire was standing up as I re-entered. On the table before him lay the small sheet of parchment, two or three long strips of printed paper, and several letters, one of which was in a violet envelope. The color struck me; it was a pale faded violet. Another envelope was fastened with light blue ribbon, a third was sealed with light blue wax. He took all these, together with the closely-written letter that he had just finished, and tied them together. I saw him write several words on the outside paper; but I could not tell what the words were. Then he sat down and looked fixedly at the little parcel. He had tied it with red tape. In an odd manner he cut the ends of the tape and fastened it with wax. I remember the shape of the little parcel so well, and I also remember wondering if I should ever see it again. The writing-table was covered with old books; a map of the county lay on it wide open, with several other things. I went on reading for a few minutes; then, as the Squire seemed to be absorbed in thought, I felt that I had better leave him.

Shortly afterwards Mrs. Paterson came to me in my solitary little room at the top of the house.

"Gracia," she said, looking earnestly at me, "has the Squire said anything about helping you?"

For the first time I rebelled against the question so kindly meant. I felt as though there were something between the Squire and myself which was sacred, and was not to be intruded upon by strangers.

"Not at present," I answered rather coldly; "but he seems interested in my music."

"Now, Gracia," said the housekeeper, "take my advice. Speak frankly to the Squire. I am sure he is a kind-hearted man. Tell him what you want to begin life with. You ought to go to one of the grand music-schools in London or Paris, and he would send you to one if you were to ask him."

"I will think it over," I replied.

"Do not need the good woman. 'You see, Gracia, time is flying.'"

When the housekeeper had gone, I thought long and deeply over what she had said; but I could not decide what to do. I felt that between myself and the Squire there was something that no one else understood. Still I resolved to speak to him that very evening about my future.

The afternoon was a delightful one; there was a crisp coolness in the air that made it a luxury to breathe. I had gone into the garden to gather some richly-colored maple-leaves, which, with some flowers, I thought would form a pretty nosegay. The Squire was pacing up and down one of the walks with a thoughtful air; but, when he saw me, his face brightened, and he came quickly to my side.

"I was just wishing that you were here, Gracia," he said. "I had been listening to the chime of the Heronsdale bells. What do you think they say to me? They say, 'Long ago—long ago.' Such a mournful chime; it has depressed me. The sound of your fresh young voice and of your merry laughter will be an agreeable change. I want you to talk to me and make me laugh."

"I will do my best," I answered, "although I find but little in me to laugh at."

Over the meadows came the sweet sound of the bells, and, as I heard them, I felt some of the depression that had fallen upon the Squire. To me too they seemed to say, "Long ago—long ago." What was his "long ago" like? I wondered. He turned to me so suddenly that he startled me.

"Do you believe, Gracia," he said, "that a wrong can be righted?"

"I should think so, unless death intervenes," I answered; and the words might have been those of a prophetess of evil.

"How do you mean?" he asked eagerly.

"I mean that a wrong can be righted, unless death steps in before it is accomplished, and so prevents it."

He stood silent for a few moments, while I went on gathering the pretty maple-leaves. Then he came out to me—and his voice was broken with sobs.

"Gracia, Gracia, I am going to fight a wrong! I must do it! I may have a heavy cross and a strange foreboding to-day. Those bells have unnerved me with their mournful 'Long ago—long ago.'"

"I am going to fight a wrong," I said, "and I must do it! I may have a heavy cross and a strange foreboding to-day. Those bells have unnerved me with their mournful 'Long ago—long ago.'"

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He raised my face in his hands and kissed my forehead.

"Yes, Gracia, I am going to fight a great wrong. I shall ride over on Heronsdale at once and see a lawyer. I know there is a man in a graph to London, Mr. Graham."

"Tell me," I cried, "have I anything to do with it?"

"Tonight," he said, "I shall have a surprise for you. When I come home, you must join me in the library, and I will tell you then all you want to know."

"Tell me now," I pleaded; "I have waited years for the knowledge; I have pity on me, and tell me now." I put that the color had left my face, and my lips trembled so that I could hardly speak. "Tell me," I entreated. "I cannot live in this suspense."

"You shall know all to-night, Gracia," he returned gently. "There are several matters to be settled first, and I must see a lawyer."

"You promise to tell me who I am, all my history, who my parents are? Oh, Heaven, how shall I live until night?"

"I promise, Gracia," he replied.

Again he kissed my forehead, and stood for some moments looking at me with long-lashed eyes. Then he led me, and so great was my rapture, my yearning, my admiration, that I fell upon the grass and buried my face in it.

Soon I heard the sound of a horse's hoofs; and, looking up, I saw that the Squire was riding Black Prince, the best horse in his stable, but one of which the grooms were all somewhat afraid—a spirited animal which could not brook restraint. I watched rider and horse until they disappeared amongst the trees.

The memory of that afternoon, with its hazy air, its sunny warmth, its odor of autumn flowers, will remain with me until I die.

I remember how I sat upon the grass, weaving sweet fancies. At last I should have a name, a home, and friends! At last I should be as others were!

I could not go back to the house; it seemed to me as though I should not be able to breathe there. I felt that I must be out in the open air, with the waving branches about me. My whole soul was on fire with impatience.

Hours must pass—hours, not minutes—before I should see the Squire again. I tried by walking to reduce the fever of impatience that consumed me. I went through the woods, and at last came to a white gate that led from a field to the river. Here I paused, and saw what I imagined to be a knot of boating men standing by the riverbank. They were talking together, and busy—I could not see what they were doing, with a rope. I waited some little time watching the scene, and then walked slowly home.

CHAPTER IV.

When I reached the manor-house, I saw, to my surprise, little groups of men standing about on the lawn. The western sky was all aflame then, and a ruddy light fell upon house and trees.

Swiftly Mrs. Paterson came up to me.

"Oh, Gracia," she cried, "do you know—have you heard?"

I flung my arms round the sturdy branch of the cedar against which I was leaning. A blow was coming, I felt; but I did not dream in what manner it would fall.

"Come with me to-night," she said. "I am sure that he wants to speak; but I cannot understand him."

"Who wants to speak?" I asked.

"The Squire," she replied. "Oh, Gracia, do you not know? The Squire has been thrown from his horse into the river, and he is dying!"

Dying! Oh, Heaven! And with closed lips that might never utter another word!

The ruddy light, the dark branches of the cedar, the white faces of the men, all seemed to mingle, and I fell forward upon the grass. The howl to my hopes was terrible. I had expected to hear my story that night, and the only lips that could tell it to me were closing in death!

Presently the goddess passed off, and I rose to my feet. Mrs. Paterson looked at me with evident discomfiture.

"It is well not to do, Gracia," she said severely. "I came to ask you to help me, and you give way to your feelings."

"I was so shocked and startled," I answered confusedly.

"So was I," she said; "but I did not faint. You must come with me, Gracia. You will understand the Squire better than any of us."

"But," I cried, seizing her hands in my agitation, "he is not dying—oh, surely—surely not dying!"

"I am afraid so," she answered mournfully. "I feel stunned. It could not be—it could not possibly be that he was dying with my story untold. Poor miserable me! After all my hopes, to be so cruelly disappointed! It was more bitter than death. Alas for my sweet fancies! I should never know now the cause of a mother's tears or the sound of a father's voice."

"Come!" said Mrs. Paterson.

"How did it happen?" I asked, as we walked slowly up the grand staircase.

"None knows," was the answer. "The Squire tried to cross the river near the ford-stones instead of passing over the bridge. The grooms think that Black Prince shied at the stones. Any way, he flung the master from his horse, and he fell into the water."

"He fell into the water then?" I cried.

"No, he was thrown upon the stones, but the water reached him. None of us knew anything of the accident until Black Prince came home without his master. Then we felt that something serious had happened. Some of the men-servants went out to look for their master, and they met a laboring man running to the Hall to tell us that the Squire was lying on the ford-stones. They went there directly, and found that he was still alive, and they brought him home. The doctors in Heronsdale are still with him; but they say they can do nothing. He is beyond mortal help—the poor Squire!"

Mrs. Paterson went into the room first, and had some conversation with the doctors. Then they both came out into the corridor, looking very grave.

"There is no hope," said one—Doctor Denison of Heronsdale. "It is useless, for us to remain; still we will stay if you wish it."

"Oh, do, sir!" sobbed Mrs. Paterson. "It seems such a sin that for the poor gentleman to die without kith or kin or home."

"Has he no relatives?" asked Doctor Lyons, who was a new-comer.

"Some very distant ones—the Caryls; but all I know of them is that they are not in England just now. I heard the Squire say so lately."

"He had been making desperate efforts to speak," said Doctor Lyons. "I suppose you have no idea what he wants?"

"No," the housekeeper replied.

"Do you know if he has made his will?"

"Yes," was the answer; "he made it this morning. He sent for the butler and me, and asked us both to witness it."

"Then I wonder what it is that he is trying to say?" said the doctor.

"I think I know," I interposed. "This afternoon the Squire told me that he wished to see me in the library to-night, for he had something of importance to tell me. He knows my history, and he said that he would tell it to me this evening."

"Poor child!" said Doctor Lyons. "He will take that story with him into another world; he will never tell it in this."

"Do not," I cried, "let him die until he has told me! He said that there was a great wrong to be done."

"It is too late," answered Doctor Lyons gravely; "he will set no wrong right now. Was it of vital consequence to you?" he asked.

"He is the only person who knows anything about my mother's will," he said, "and who can tell me my name and who I am?"

"Come into my room," said Doctor Lyons. "I will write up a note for you to speak."

We went to the apartment together—the doctors to wait the first of my presence, I to see if there were not two late. On the great sofa bed in the Square, but so changed—so changed. One would hardly have recognized it. The room was closed, and the air was heavy with the odor of his face. Ah, why was it that when I saw him so my heart melted within me? I forgot the doctors and the housekeeper. I forgot everything except that the only man in the world who had ever spoken kindly to me lay there dying. I knelt down by his bedside, and burst into a passionate fit of weeping.

"Hush, Gracia," said the housekeeper; "you will disturb him."

"The Squire must have heard the name, for he opened his eyes. He knew me; his dying eyes rested on my face with a look that must haunt me until my own eyes closed for ever—a look of intense love and longing. I turned my head away, sick at heart. It was a gaze no one could bear unmoved."

"He knows you," said Doctor Lyons.

Alas, yes, he knew me! He tried to hold out his poor feeble hands, but they dropped unresponsive on the coverlet.

"Speak to him," said the doctor.

"I said, 'do you know me?'"

Alas, yes, there was not a doubt of it! There was a faint flush in his eyes; a slight throb of color came into his face. I took one of his hands in mine, but it was deathly cold. He knew me, for he made a terrible effort to speak to me. He tried so hard to utter one word, while we all powerless to help him, stood round him.

"At last, with great courage, I bent over him and whispered in his ear—"

"Squire, is it of me—is it of Gracia you wish to speak?"

The poor lips parted and moved, but no sound came from them.

"You want to tell me who I am?" I said eagerly.

Again he made a desperate effort to speak; it was in vain. He snatched back with an air of disgust, and despair. In my anguish I turned to Doctor Lyons.

"Can you not give him anything to restore his power of speech?" I asked quickly.

"No," he answered gravely. "He is quite conscious; but he will never speak again."

"It is a great trouble to you," said Doctor Lyons, looking compassionately at me.

"Greater than death itself," I answered.

I knew that the dying man heard me by his pained expression that came over his face. I made another great effort, and drew me to him. Ah, why, why did his hand seek my face and my hair? What instinct made me kiss it, even while my tears fell fast upon it?

"If he could only speak to me!" I cried. "If he could but speak! One word would change the whole world to me; and he meant to tell me all to-night!"

Then I both thought myself that I was allowing my grief to grow to make me selfish. I was suffering pain, but I was forgetting that any one could endure but a little of it. The Squire was dying—dying without kith or kin near him.

So I kissed the nervous limbs and smoothed the white hair. I laid my face, so close to his, that I could feel his breath. I heard one of the doctors say softly to the housekeeper, "What is she to him?" and the answer was, "Nothing." The Squire did not hear it. He lay there, still with a look that I saw tears come into his eyes.

"He is weeping," I said to Doctor Lyons.

"He must hear and understand, or that could not happen."