

IN CUPID'S NET.

(CONCLUDED.)

I remembered Lady Cary's caution. There was no light, except that of the moon, which fell silver-white across the hall. With a quick beating heart I unlocked the door. There the papers lay, untouched. In silence I took them away.

What should I do with the precious packet? It must be destroyed; but it was not an easy thing to do. Even if I took the letters into sheets, there would still be the remnants. There was no fire in any of the rooms to which I had access; I could not go to the kitchen. A sudden idea came to me. I would take the package just as it was, fasten a heavy stone to it, and fling it into the depths of the river Dale.

The idea delighted me. I wrapped a shawl round my head and shoulders, and, holding the packet tightly in my hand, went out. As I passed the door of the large conservatory, I saw by the light of the moon the shadow of a man's figure; but he did not appear to see me as I hastened along.

How fair the landscape was, the moon shining upon the turf and upon the leaves of the trees, which rustled gently in the wind! The calm brooding silence of night lay around me as I walked on leisurely. There was no need to hurry now. I had the packet in my hand, and the river Dale was shining in the distance. At length I reached the bank, and stood for some moments looking down at the water that would be the grave of my hopes, that would roll over the proofs of my birth and my fortune, sacrificed for the sake of my love.

Presently I sat down upon the grass, and tried to realize how Sir Adrian would look if he knew all. How his blue eyes would brighten, yet reproach me! How his face would change from grave to glad, and back to grave again! Never shall I forget the beauty, the serenity of those few minutes I spent by the banks of the river in the moonlight, with the papers in my hand.

Then I found a heavy stone, and I fastened it in my apron; the weight was quite sufficient to sink a much larger parcel than the one I held in my hands. I walked with it slowly to the water's edge. I kissed it. Farewell to name, to fortune, to every hope in this world, for my love's sake—for my love's sake, farewell! And as I raised my arm to fling the parcel into the stream, I cried, "For my love's sake!" And then—shall I ever forget the horror of that moment?—a hand seized mine, and took the parcel from me.

"What are you doing, Gracia?" exclaimed a voice that chilled my heart. It was Sir Adrian.

I staggered back white, trembling, and faint. For some moments I could not recover myself; and then I broke into a wild passion of tears.

"Oh, give it to me, Sir Adrian!" I implored. "Pray you, for Heaven's sake, give it to me!"

"I must know what it is, Gracia; I cannot let this go on. I have a suspicion that it is something connected with yourself, and I must satisfy myself."

In my despair I sank upon my knees at his feet.

"I beseech you, give it to me!" I cried. "For my sake, for your own sake, for Heaven's sake! I shall go mad if you touch it!"

He looked at me.

"I could refuse you nothing that was reasonable; but in this instance I must be master; I must know what this is."

When I heard his tone, when I saw the expression on his face, I knew all was over, and sank sobbing upon the grass.

"I am grieved to distress you, Gracia," he continued. "I cannot bear the sight of your tears; but I must protect you against yourself."

By the light of the moon I saw him untie the parcel and take out the great stone and throw it away. I saw him take out the papers and scan them. I could hear the rustling of page after page—the certificates, my father's letter, and finally the will. Then I became unconscious. It seemed to me that the moon and the stars fell to earth, that the river rose and swept me away.

When my eyes opened at last, I saw neither moon nor river—only the face of the man I loved bending over mine, with a look in his eyes to have won which I would have laid down my life.

"Gracia," he was saying, "Gracia, my noble, generous darling! Gracia, open your eyes and look at me!"

Then I sat up gazing at him with dim wondering eyes.

"Gracia," he said passionately, "what have you to tell me? I know everything. You would have deprived yourself of name and fortune. Why—tell me why?"

And I answered him—

"For your sake. I could not bear that your loss should be my gain."

When the words had passed my lips, it seemed to me that the river rose again and carried me away. When I came back to life, there was no river in sight, my love with the bonnie blue eyes had disappeared, and I was lying in a room that was strange to me. The village doctor was standing by my bed, and Mrs. Paterson and Kate Fisher were also in the chamber.

"That is better," said the doctor; "now we shall do!"

The sun was shining brightly into the room. Whither had Sir Adrian gone? Where were my papers? I started up with a wild cry when I remembered them.

"I am answered; but the words were not in a protest, even against her will. Then, after a few moments' thought, she said, 'What a terrible mistake! I wonder the old Squire could rest in his grave! His only child too!'

"It is plain enough, mother, that these people of Heron's Nest and the Squire's will make it their business what she found in the old man's rooms. Sir Adrian had them, and must be a stray thief. Do you see the generosity of the deed? She was giving up name, fortune, position—and why? Shall I tell you why, mother?"

"Yes," answered her ladyship; and there were tears in her eyes as she spoke.

"For my sake, and because she could not bear that her faith should be in loss, she was giving up all that she valued most in the world. 'Mother,' he added quickly, 'do you think there is another woman in the world who would do this for me?'

And the tears rained down Lady Cary's face as she answered that she did not.

"She must have her rights, and have them at once," Sir Adrian went on. "The Squire might well speak of fighting a wrong! A more cruel wrong than this was never perpetrated. I will send for Mr. Graham to-morrow, and she will be acknowledged mistress of Heron's Nest at once. It is hers."

"Yes," agreed her ladyship most unwillingly; "it is hers. But what will the world say?"

"I care nothing for that," replied Sir Adrian. "Mother, you will see that she is known henceforth as Miss Dere, heiress of Heron's Nest."

Then I was carried up-stairs, and my terrible fever began, and lasted until I awoke that morning and saw the sunshine flickering on the wall.

My senses were clear, and I found that my story was known, for the nurses called me Miss Dere.

When I was able to bear the interview, Lady Cary came to see me. She was kind and gentle, but evidently ill at ease.

"It has been a terrible mistake, my dear," she said, bending down to kiss me; "the Squire was greatly to blame. You have been cruelly treated!" She was silent for a few moments, then she continued, "For my share in it I beg your pardon. I was completely misled. I was forced to believe that you were the unacknowledged daughter of an old servant—a friendless dependant on the charity of the house; and, in treating you as such, I did no wrong. Indeed," she added, after a pause, "I may say that I treated you generously. Of course I had not the faintest idea that you were Gracia Dere."

I drew her hand to my lips and kissed it.

"I hope I shall never get well, Lady Cary," I said. "I cannot bear the thought of taking Heron's Nest from Sir Adrian. He is so proud of the old place!"

She smiled—a peculiar smile, such as I had never seen on her face before.

"It is your right," she answered. "My son will feel the loss; but he is not a poor man; he will soon find another home. No harm has been done to us; but great harm has been done to you. We must atone for it."

When Lady Cary did anything, it was always royally done, and she made full amends to me.

"I can never do too much for you," she said to me one day; "for you would have given up everything you had in the world for my son."

As I grew stronger, I found that the whole country knew of the strange incident which had taken place at the old manor-house. Lady Cary herself had at once made it public; and, as accounts of it had appeared in all the newspapers, every one in England knew how the poor companion had become the proud owner of Heron's Nest.

The day came when I was well enough to discuss my future with Lady Cary. I had not seen Sir Adrian since my illness began. Lady Cary had promised me from day to day that when I was a little better he should be present at the consultation we were going to have. It was one of the last days of October, and I was carried into the library on my couch.

How it brought back old times to me, to see that room again, the chair in which my father, the Squire, had sat writing, the table on which those precious papers had lain!

It was a bright warm autumn day; a few late roses were in bloom, and the chrysanthemums were unusually fine. During all these long weeks I had forgotten Lady Aditha; but now I remembered her suddenly as the woman whom I understood Sir Adrian was to marry. I asked Lady Cary where she was.

"Gone," she replied. "Mrs. Roper has a great dread of illness. As soon as she knew that you had been better, she left, and Lady Aditha went with her."

"I hope—"

"I hope that my illness did not delay the marriage."

"What marriage?" asked Lady Cary quickly.

"Did I dream it? I had many dreams when I was ill, and they were so real. I am confused at times. I thought Sir Adrian and Lady Aditha were to be married."

Lady Cary looked a little perplexed.

"I told you that," she said. "I ought to explain. Lady Aditha's mother and I were great friends, and our children were playmates twenty years ago. It was her mother and I who talked about their marriage then, and I have wished for it ever since."

"Then they were not engaged?" I queried.

"No," she replied. "It is imperative, but I shall do my best to make up for those wasted years now. Anything that we can do—my daughter and myself—we will do most willingly."

Lady Cary cut her raptures very short.

"To think," sighed Mrs. Sale, "that the last of the Dacres was living amongst us, and we did not know it!"

She made me many overtures of friendship; and her daughter, who has never had a civil word for the friendless girl, was awfully polite to the heiress of Heron's Nest; but I could not encourage their advances.

Lady Cary, in talking to me about the future, said that she fancied Sir Adrian would purchase an estate in Norfolk. She expressed great affection for me, and said that, if the idea met with my approval, I should spend next season in town with her. I did not tell her why the suggestion pleased me so much. I knew that, if I were in town with her, I should see her son almost every day.

Sir Adrian wrote to me from Spain, and told me that he had seen the church where my mother and father were married—that he had seen the marriage register and the marble monument that bore the name of 'Isola.' He added—and I kissed the written words again and again—that he should be back at Christmas, and hoped to spend it at Heron's Nest.

And Christmas came with a pure mantle of snow and a crown of green holly. All that had passed in my mind before would have seemed like a dream but that I was so happily true. This Christmas Eve was exactly like the last, cold and clear and beautiful, with the stars shining brightly. There amongst them shone the luminous star that had led me only last year to the postern-gate. Little need to ask whether its light had led me now. I could hear the bells chiming, as I had heard them long years before. "Christmas is come—Christmas is come!" Every word came so clearly to me over the snow.

Heron's Nest that Christmas Eve looked most picturesque, and I had taken great pains to make it so. Mistletoe and holly hung in festoons from the eaves of the grand old mansion. Christmas was in our hearts, bringing with it love and peace. No harsh wind disturbed the harmony that reigned throughout the house.

I had resisted every effort that Lady Cary made to relinquish her position. I was determined that, so long as she remained in the house, she should be complete mistress of it; and when she was in town, I should show her appreciation by my increased kindness to me. We had both agreed that the old manor-house should look its fairest and best on Christmas Eve. Every picture-frame, every chair was wreathed with holly and laurel. There was no doubt about its being Christmas, and the gay appearance of Heron's Nest was the result of my resolution.

Sir Adrian was to come that night, just as he had done on Christmas Eve the year before, through the starlight, over the snow. Oh, happy Christmas that was to bring him to me! I did not re-lect whether his stay would be long or short; I did not try to foresee any ending; all my thoughts were concentrated on the fact that I was to see him.

Lady Cary had overheard my dream, and rose sick, trembled with white tulle—and I wore diamond ornaments. Yes, I—Gracia, who last year was a friendless dependant—wore the Dere diamonds, and at my throat and in my hair was fastened a spray of laurustinus. My Heaven forgive me if, as I looked in the glass, I felt a thrill of pride! I could not help seeing then that I was beautiful; and I was glad.

The bells of Heronsdale Church had not ceased chiming, and the moon was shining peacefully in the heavens. Feeling restless and impatient, I went to the windows of the drawing-room, whence I could see the drive. This was my home now, and I must bid him welcome to it. When at last I saw the carriage, I never thought of etiquette, but hastened to the hall door to be the first to greet him; and I remember no more until a handsome face, cold with the fresh air, touched mine, and the voice I loved best on earth cried, "Gracia!" Then I bade him welcome home. After that both of us must have forgotten everything else in the world but each other, as we stood on the top of the great flight of steps by the wide-open hall door, the ruddy light streaming out upon the snow.

Presently he unclasped his arms, and, going into the hall, he took down a large turk cloak that was hanging there and wrapped it round me.

"Come with me, Gracia," he said. "I have something to say to you; and I can say it nowhere else but at the old postern-gate."

He went with him down the terrace-steps, across the lawn, and over to the postern-gate. The ivy-mantled wall was covered with snow, as it had been a twelvemonth before, and the bright Christmas star was shining overhead. I did not tremble; but a feeling of awe came over me. He had not spoken as we walked along; but when we stood near the ivy and the wind stirred the green leaves and the snow fell, he caught me in his arms and kissed me passionately.

"Oh, Gracia," he cried, "here, where the light of the star first led you to me, let me ask you—will you be my wife?"

I took courage, and looked up into his face.

"What of Lady Aditha?" I asked, blushing.

"Lady Aditha is going to marry the Duke of Cortland," he laughed. "She was very fond of me when I was a little boy; but, to tell you the truth, Gracia, she ceased to care for me when she found that I had lost Heron's Nest."

"Did you care?" I asked falteringly.

"Not at all. Why, Gracia, I have always loved you, but you did not love me. I loved you first—saw you—you, with your beautiful dark eyes and sweet quaint name—I loved you ever since. Will you be my wife, Gracia?"

"I could not speak for very excess of joy."

"I shall never love any one else," he went on. "My love is for you. Gracia will never change. Will you, Gracia, will you?"

I said "Yes"; and then I in my turn told him how I had loved him.

So we pledged our truth under the light of the stars, with the Christmas snow lying white on the ground and the bells chiming—a truth that has never been broken, and will be kept while life lasts.

It was after that the light of the Christmas star led me, and his rays shine warm in my heart even now.

CHAPTER XII.

It was Christmas Eve again; but how changed was all the world to me! Last year a nameless outcast, this year I was Gracia Dere, heiress of Heron's Nest; and, with swiftly-falling tears, I offered up my thanks to Heaven.

Nothing could have been kinder than the world's welcome to me. I contrasted it with that accorded to me when I first came to the old manor-house. I learned many lessons then that I should never have learned otherwise. The wonder excited by my story did not last long. I heard afterwards that no one was very much surprised; people confessed that they had not thought of it before. The neighboring residents welcomed me most heartily, while they approved highly of Lady Cary; they said that she had done the right and proper thing—that, by remaining with me for a time, she had shown the greatest magnanimity and generosity; and the whole county warmed to her ladyship as it had never warmed before.

Lady Cary thought it better to change most of the new servants, but not the older ones; they were only too delighted to know that I was the old Squire's daughter.

I must confess that I enjoyed the first call made by Mrs. and Mr. Sale. When I was simply Gracia, without a second name, they had treated me with the coldest contempt; they treated Miss Dere with the utmost respect. Mrs. Sale held out her arms to me, and would have embraced me; but I could not suffer her to do that.

"My dearest child," she cried effusively, "you must do your best to make up for those wasted years now. Anything that we can do—my daughter and myself—we will do most willingly."

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THE END.

THE IDLE LAWYER.

It was a capital hit and we delivered, full of the eyes. It sent the recipient, a gaudily dressed boy, spinning into the gutter, much to the detriment of his fine apparel, and served him right for insulting an unprotected girl, whose hurried steps and timid manner betrayed her uneasiness at being alone on the street at such an hour.

Having done his duty in the premises, and waiting to see the best aged cowboy pick himself up ungraciously and sink away abashed and cowed, Ned Armour turned to see what had become of his protégé. She stood trembling, as though fright had arrested her steps. Her pale face, on which the light of a neighboring lamp chance to fall, was of surprising beauty, and Ned, being a knight as gallant as brave, begged permission to see her safe home. In sweet, gentle voice, with a slightly foreign tinge, she accepted the offer, and the two walked off together, for the most part silently.

"Will you not come in, sir?" said the girl, stopping at the door of a plain-looking house.

"My father, I am sure, will wish to thank you for the kind service you have rendered. He is an invalid, and it was an errand to procure him some necessaries that took me out to-night."

Ned accepted the invitation, and that was the beginning of his acquaintance with M. Bertrand and his charming daughter Marie.

Ned Armour was the junior of a law firm, of which his uncle, Mr. Banting, was the head. He had little love for the profession, but had entered into it to please his uncle, to whom he owed everything, his rearing included. It is safe to say that after the adventure just related he spent two evenings in the society of Marie and her father to one passed with Coke & Blackstone.

M. Bertrand was an old soldier of the first empire, who, with the fall of his chief, had lost all; and driven into exile with his infant child, he had wandered from country to country in the hope to mend his fortune. Now, his daughter and himself had no other dependence than the earnings of the former, who turned to the best account she could her proficiency in music by giving private lessons.

Ned was glad to have assisted his friends in their own cause, but he knew how to do so without giving offence to the proud old soldier.

"I've been thinking of a wife for you," said Ned's uncle one morning, as the two sat together in the senior's private office.

"So have I," replied Ned.

"Ahem!" returned the uncle. "I've picked one out for you," he continued.

"I've picked one out for myself," said Ned, "that is, provided I can obtain her consent."

"The deuce you have!" exclaimed the head of the firm, and in a way regarded the question as one within his own exclusive jurisdiction.

There is no knowing to what a pitch the discussion would have reached but for the entrance of two gentlemen who came to consult Mr. Banting.

A Frenchman, a stranger, it seems, had died suddenly while on a visit to the city some years before, leaving a large sum of money. One of the two gentlemen present had been appointed trustee of the fund, and the other claimed to be next kin to the deceased, whose cousin he asserted himself to be.

"The deceased spoke of having a brother," said the trustee, "in search of whom he was traveling."

"Yes, his brother Antoine," said the other, "who absconded from this country years ago, and of whose death I have ample proofs."

The papers were submitted to Mr. Banting, who promised to examine them and give his opinion next day, at which time, if everything was regular, the money was to be turned over to the claimant.

It was of this that the old man paid attention to business of the office, but the mention of certain names during the colloquy caused him to prick up his ears, while seemingly busy with the morning paper, and, five minutes later he was running at full speed to the house of his friends, the Bertrands.

At the appointed hour next morning the same two gentlemen came to hear Mr. Banting's decision. Ned, as a fore, had the morning paper before him, but kept a sharp eye turned.

"The papers appear to be all right," observed Mr. Banting. "I have scrutinized them carefully, and find nothing wanting."

"Then it only remains to pay over the money," answered Ned, "said the hair-expectant, rubbing his hands."

"Ned, more," replied Mr. Banting.

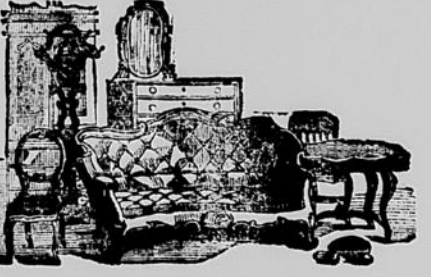
The trustee produced his accounts, showing the sum on hand, which had been largely enhanced by accruing interests, and was beginning to draw a check for the amount, when Ned Armour threw aside his paper, and strode forward.

"Don't be too fast," he exclaimed.

It was the first time Ned had ever interfered in a business consultation, and his uncle looked up surprised.

"Why, what do you know about it?" asked the latter.

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