

## **CHAPTER XVIII - THE MISTRESS OF TRIMLEY DEEN**

Three weary months had passed, when a new idea was put into my head by an Englishman whom I met at Trieste. He advised turning my back on Europe, and trying the effect of scenes of life that would be new to me. I hired a vessel, and sailed out of the civilized world. When I next stood on terra firma, my feet were on the lovely beach of one of the Pacific Islands.

What I suffered I have not told yet, and do not design to tell. The bitterness of those days hid itself from view at the time--and shall keep its concealment still. Even if I could dwell on my sorrows with the eloquence of a practised writer, some obstinate inner reluctance would persist in holding me dumb.

More than a year had passed before I returned to Trimley Deen, and alarmed my stepmother by "looking like a foreign sailor."

The irregular nature of my later travels had made it impossible to forward the few letters that had arrived for me. They were neatly laid out on the library table.

The second letter that I took up bore the postmark of Genoa. I opened it, and discovered that the--

No! I cannot write of him by that mean name; and his own name is still unknown to me. Let me call him--and, oh, don't think that I am deceived again!--let me call him the Penitent.

The letter had been addressed to me from his deathbed, and had been written under dictation. It contained an extraordinary enclosure--a small torn fragment of paper with writing on it.

"Read the poor morsel that I send to you first" (the letter began). "My time on earth is short; you will save me explanations which may be too much for my strength."

On one side of the fragment, I found these words:

"... cruise to the Mediterranean for my wife's health. If Cristel isn't afraid of passing some months at sea..."

On the other side, there was a fragment of conclusion:

"... thoroughly understand. All ready. Write word what night, and what ... loving brother, Stephen Toller."

I instantly remembered the miller's rich brother; thinking of him for the first time since he had been in my mind for a moment, on the night of my meeting with Cristel. On the fourteenth page of this narrative Toller's brother will be found briefly alluded to in a few lines.

I returned eagerly to the letter. Thus it was continued:

"That bit of torn paper I found under the bed, while I was secretly searching Mr. Toller's room. I had previously suspected You. From my own examination of his face, when he refused to humor my deafness by writing what I asked him to tell me, I suspected Mr. Toller next. You will see in the fragment, what I saw--that Toller the brother had a yacht, and was going to the Mediterranean; and that Toller the miller had written, asking him to favour Cristel's escape. The rest, Cristel herself can tell you.

"I know you had me followed. At Marseilles, I got tired of it, and gave your men the slip. At every port in the Mediterranean I inquired for the yacht, and heard nothing of her. They must have changed their minds on board, and gone somewhere else. I refer you to Cristel again.

"Arrived at Genoa, on my way back to England, I met with a skilled Italian surgeon. He declared that he could restore my hearing--but he warned me that I was in a weak state of health, and he refused to answer for the result of the operation. Without hesitating for a moment, I told him to operate. I would have given fifty lives for one exquisite week of perfect hearing. I have had three weeks of perfect hearing. Otherwise, I have had a life of enjoyment before I die.

"It is useless to ask your pardon. My conduct was too infamous for that. Will you remember the family taint, developed by a deaf man's isolation among his fellow-creatures? But I had some days when my mother's sweet nature tried to make itself felt in me, and did not wholly fail. I am going to my mother now: her spirit has been with me ever since my hearing was restored; her spirit said to me last night: "Atone, my son! Give the man whom you have wronged, the woman whom he loves." I had found out the uncle's address in England (which I now enclose) at one of the Yacht Clubs. I had intended to go to the house, and welcome her on her return. You must go instead of me; you will see that lovely face when I am in my grave. Good-bye, Roylake. The cold hand that touches us all, sooner or later, is very near

to me. Be merciful to the next scoundrel you meet, for the sake of The Cur."

I say there was good in that suffering man; and I thank God I was not quite wrong about him after all. Arriving at Mr. Stephen Toller's country seat, by the earliest train that would take me there, I found a last trial of endurance in store for me. Cristel was away with her uncle, visiting some friends.

Cristel's aunt received me with kindness which I can never forget. "We have noticed lately that Cristel was in depressed spirits; no uncommon thing," Mrs. Stephen Toller continued, looking at me with a gentle smile, "since a parting which I know you must have felt deeply too. No, Mr. Roylake, she is not engaged to be married--and she will never be married, unless you forgive her. Ah, you forgive her because you love her! She thought of writing to tell you her motives, when she visited her father's grave on our return to England. But I was unable to obtain your address. Perhaps, I may speak for her now?"

I knew how Lady Rachel's interference had appealed to Cristel's sense of duty and sense of self-respect; I had heard from her own lips that she distrusted herself, if she allowed me to press her. But she had successfully concealed from me the terror with which she regarded her rejected lover, and the influence over her which her father had exercised. Always mindful of his own interests, the miller knew that he would be the person blamed if he allowed his daughter to marry me. "They will say I did it, with an eye to my son-in-law's money; and gentlefolks may ruin a man who lives by selling flour." That was how he expressed himself in a letter to his brother.

The whole of the correspondence was shown to me by Mrs. Stephen Toller.

After alluding to his wealthy brother's desire that he should retire from business, the miller continued as follows:

"What you are ready to do for me, I want you to do for Cristy. She is in danger, in more ways than one, and I am obliged to get her away from my house as if I was a smuggler, and my girl contraband goods. I am a bad hand at writing, so I leave Cristy to tell you the particulars. Will you receive her, brother Stephen? and take care of her? and do it as soon as possible?"

Mr. Stephen Toller's cordial reply mentioned that his vessel was ready to sail, and would pass the mouth of The Loke on her southward voyage. His brother caught at the idea thus suggested.

I have alluded to Giles Toller's sly look to his lodger, when I returned the

manuscript of the confession. The old man's unscrupulous curiosity had already applied a second key to the cupboard in the lodger's room. There he had found the "criminal stories" mentioned in the journal--including the story of abduction referred to by Lady Rachel. This gave him the very idea which his lodger had already relied on for carrying Cristel away by the river (under the influence, of course, of a soporific drug), while her father was keeping watch on the road. The secreting of the oars with this purpose in view, had failed as a measure of security. The miller's knowledge of the stream, and his daughter's ready courage, had suggested the idea of letting the boat drift, with Cristel hidden in it. Two of the yacht's crew, hidden among the trees, watched the progress of the boat until it rounded the promontory, and struck the shore. There, the yacht's boat was waiting. The rocket was fired to re-assure her father; and Cristel was rowed to the mouth of the river, and safely received on board the yacht. Thus (with his good brother's help) the miller had made the River his Guilty accomplice in the abduction of his own child!

When I had read the correspondence, we spoke again of Cristel.

"To save time," Mrs. Stephen Toller said, "I will write to my husband to-day, by a mounted messenger. He shall only tell Cristel that you have come back to England, and you shall arrange to meet her in our grounds when she returns. I am a childless woman, Mr. Roylake--and I love her as I should have loved a daughter of my own. Where improvement (in external matters only) has seemed to be possible, it has been my delight to improve her. Your stepmother and Lady Rachel will acknowledge, even from their point of view, that there is a mistress who is worthy of her position at Trimley Deen."

When Cristel returned the next day, she found that her uncle had deserted her, and suddenly discovered a man in the shrubbery. What that man said and did, and what the result of it was, may be inferred if I relate a remarkable event. Mrs. Roylake has retired from the domestic superintendence of Trimley Deen.