

BOOK THE THIRD.

CHAPTER I - THE HONEYMOON.

MORE than six weeks had passed. The wedded lovers were still enjoying their honeymoon at Vange Abbey.

Some offense had been given, not only to Mrs. Eyrecourt, but to friends of her way of thinking, by the strictly private manner in which the marriage had been celebrated. The event took everybody by surprise when the customary advertisement appeared in the newspapers. Foreseeing the unfavorable impression that might be produced in some quarters, Stella had pleaded for a timely retreat to the seclusion of Romaine's country house. The will of the bride being, as usual, the bridegroom's law, to Vange they retired accordingly.

On one lovely moonlight night, early in July, Mrs. Romaine left her husband on the Belvidere, described in Major Hynd's narrative, to give the housekeeper certain instructions relating to the affairs of the household. Half an hour later, as she was about to ascend again to the top of the house, one of the servants informed her that "the master had just left the Belvidere, and had gone into his study."

Crossing the inner hall, on her way to the study, Stella noticed an unopened letter, addressed to Romaine, lying on a table in a corner. He had probably laid it aside and forgotten it. She entered his room with the letter in her hand.

The only light was a reading lamp, with the shade so lowered that the corners of the study were left in obscurity. In one of these corners Romaine was dimly visible, sitting with his head sunk on his breast. He never moved when Stella opened the door. At first she thought he might be asleep.

"Do I disturb you, Lewis?" she asked softly.

"No, my dear."

There was a change in the tone of his voice, which his wife's quick ear detected. "I am afraid you are not well," she said anxiously.

"I am a little tired after our long ride to-day. Do you want to go back to the Belvidere?"

"Not without you. Shall I leave you to rest here?"

He seemed not to hear the question. There he sat, with his head hanging down, the shadowy counterfeit of an old man. In her anxiety, Stella approached him, and put her hand caressingly on his head. It was burning hot. "O!" she cried, "you are ill, and you are trying to hide it from me."

He put his arm round her waist and made her sit on his knee. "Nothing is the matter with me," he said, with an uneasy laugh. "What have you got in your hand? A letter?"

"Yes. Addressed to you and not opened yet." He took it out of her hand, and threw it carelessly on a sofa near him. "Never mind that now! Let us talk." He paused, and kissed her, before he went on. "My darling, I think you must be getting tired of Vange?"

"Oh, no! I can be happy anywhere with you--and especially at Vange. You don't how this noble old house interests me, and how I admire the glorious country all round it."

He was not convinced. "Vange is very dull," he said, obstinately; "and your friends will be wanting to see you. Have you heard from your mother lately?"

"No. I am surprised she has not written."

"She has not forgiven us for getting married so quietly," he went on. "We had better go back to London and make our peace with her. Don't you want to see the house my aunt left me at Highgate?"

Stella sighed. The society of the man she loved was society enough for her. Was he getting tired of his wife already? "I will go with you wherever you like." She said those words in tones of sad submission, and gently got up from his knee.

He rose also, and took from the sofa the letter which he had thrown on it. "Let us see what our friends say," he resumed. "The address is in Loring's handwriting."

As he approached the table on which the lamp was burning, she noticed that he moved with a languor that was new in her experience of him. He sat down and opened the letter. She watched him with an anxiety which had now become intensified to suspicion. The shade of the lamp still prevented her from seeing his face plainly. "Just what I told you," he said; "the Lorings want to know when they are to see us in London; and your mother says she 'feels like that character in Shakespeare who was cut by his own daughters.' Read it."

He handed her the letter. In taking it, she contrived to touch the lamp shade, as if by accident, and tilted it so that the full flow of the light fell on him. He started back--but not before she had seen the ghastly pallor on his face. She had not only heard it from Lady Loring, she knew from his own unreserved confession to her what that startling change really meant. In an instant she was on her knees at his feet. "Oh, my darling," she cried, "it was cruel to keep that secret from your wife! You have heard it again!"

She was too irresistibly beautiful, at that moment, to be reproved. He gently raised her from the floor--and owned the truth.

"Yes," he said; "I heard it after you left me on the Belvidere--just as I heard it on another moonlight night, when Major Hynd was here with me. Our return to this house is perhaps the cause. I don't complain; I have had a long release."

She threw her arms round his neck. "We will leave Vange to-morrow," she said.

It was firmly spoken. But her heart sank as the words passed her lips. Vange Abbey had been the scene of the most unalloyed happiness in her life. What destiny was waiting for her when she returned to London?