

CHAPTER VI

It was some time before Philip could make up his mind whether or no he would attend his tryst with Hilda. In the first place, he felt that it was an unsafe proceeding generally, inasmuch as moonlight meetings with so lovely a person might, should they come to the knowledge of Miss Lee, be open to misconstruction; and particularly because, should she show the least tenderness towards him, he knew in his heart that he could not trust himself, however much he might be engaged in another direction. At twenty-one the affections cannot be outraged with impunity, but have an awkward way of asserting themselves, ties of honour notwithstanding.

But as a rule, when in our hearts we wish to do anything, that thing must be bad indeed if we cannot find a satisfactory excuse for doing it; and so it was with Philip. Now, thought he to himself, would be his opportunity to inform Hilda of his relations with Maria Lee, and to put an end to his flirtation with her; for, ostensibly at any rate, it was nothing more than a very serious flirtation--that is to say, though there had been words of love, and even on her part a passionate avowal of affection, wrung in an unguarded moment from the depths of her proud heart, there had been no formal engagement. It was a thing that must be done, and now was the time to do it. And so he made up his mind to go.

But when, that night, he found himself sitting in the appointed place,

and waiting for the coming of the woman he was about to discard, but whom he loved with all the intensity of his fierce nature, he began to view the matter in other lights, and to feel his resolution oozing from him. Whether it was the silence of the place that told upon his nerves, strained as they were with expectation--for silence, and more especially silence by night, is a great unveiler of realities,--or the dread of bitter words, or the prescience of the sharp pang of parting --for he knew enough of Hilda to know that, what he had to say once said, she would trouble him no more--whether it was these things, or whatever it was that affected him, he grew most unaccountably anxious and depressed. Moreover, in this congenial condition of the atmosphere of his mind, all its darker and hidden characteristics sprang into a vigorous growth. Superstitions and presentiments crowded in upon him. He peopled his surroundings with the shades of intangible deeds that yet awaited doing, and grew afraid of his own thoughts. He would have fled from the spot, but he could not fly; he could only watch the flicker of the moonlight upon the peaceful pool beside him, and--wait.

At last she came with quick and anxious steps, and, though but a few minutes before he had dreaded her coming, he now welcomed it eagerly. For our feelings, of whatever sort, when directed towards each other, are so superficial as compared with the intensity of our fears when we are terrified by calamity, or the presence, real or fancied, of the unknown, that in any moment of emergency, more especially if it be of a mental kind, we are apt to welcome our worst enemy as a drowning man welcomes a spar.

"At last," he said, with a sigh of relief. "How late you are!"

"I could not get away. There were some people to dinner;" and then, in a softened voice, "How pale you look! Are you ill?"

"No, only a little tired."

After this there was silence, and the pair stood facing one another, each occupied with their own thoughts, and each dreading to put them into words. Once Philip made a beginning of speech, but his voice failed him; the beating of his heart seemed to choke his utterance.

At length she leaned, as though for support, against the trunk of a pine-tree, in the boughs of which the night breeze was whispering, and spoke in a cold clear voice.

"You asked me to meet you here to-night. Have you anything to say to me? No, do not speak; perhaps I had better speak first. I have something to say to you, and what I have to say may influence whatever is in your mind. Listen; you remember what passed between us nearly a month ago, when I was so weak as to let you see how much I loved you?"

Philip bowed his head in assent.

"Very good. I have come here to-night, not to give you any lover's

meeting, but to tell you that no such words must be spoken again, and that I am about to make it impossible that they should be spoken either by you or by me. I am going away from here, _never_, I hope, to return."

"Going away!" he gasped. "When?"

Here was the very thing he hoped for coming to pass, and yet the words that should have been so full of comfort fell upon him cold as ice, and struck him into misery.

"When! why, to-morrow morning. A relation of mine is ill in Germany, the only one I have. I never saw him, and care nothing for him, but it will give me a pretext; and, once gone, I shall not return. I have told Maria that I must go. She cried about it, poor girl."

At these words, all recollection of his purpose passed out of Philip's mind; all he realized was that, unless he could alter her determination, he was about to lose the woman he so passionately adored, and whose haughty pride was to him in itself more charming than all poor Maria's gentle love.

"Hilda, do not go," he said, seizing her hand, which she immediately withdrew; "do not leave me. You know how I love you."

"And why should I not leave you, even supposing it to be true that you

do love me? To my cost I love you, and am I any longer to endure the daily humiliation of seeing myself, the poor German companion, who has nothing but her beauty, put aside in favour of another whom I also love. You say you love me, and bid me stay; now, tell me what is your purpose towards me? Do you intend to try to take advantage of my infatuation to make me your mistress? It is, I am told, a common thing for such proposals to be made to women in my position, whom it would be folly for wealthy gentlemen to marry. If so, abandon that idea; for I tell you, Philip, that I would rather die than so disgrace my ancient name to gratify myself. I know you money-loving English do not think very much of race unless the bearers of the name are rich; but we do; and, although you would think it a *_mesalliance_* to marry me, I, on the other hand, should not be proud of an alliance with you. Why, Philip, my ancestors were princes of royal blood when yours still herded the swine in these woods. I can show more than thirty quarterings upon my shield, each the mark of a noble house, and I will not be the first to put a bar sinister across them. Now, I have spoken plainly, indelicately perhaps, and there is only one more word to be said between us, and that word is *_good-bye_*," and she held out her hand.

He did not seem to see it; indeed, he had scarcely heard the latter part of what she said. Presently he lifted his face, and it bore traces of a dreadful inward struggle. It was deadly pale, and great black rings had painted themselves beneath the troubled eyes.

"Hilda," he said, hoarsely, "don't go; I cannot bear to let you go. I will marry you."

"Think of what you are saying, Philip, and do not be rash. I do not wish to entrap you into marriage. You love money. Remember that Maria, with all her possessions, asks nothing better than to become your wife, and that I have absolutely nothing but my name and my good looks. Look at me," and she stepped out into a patch of moonlight that found its way between the trees, and, drawing the filmy shawl she wore from her head and bare neck and bosom, stood before him in all the brightness of her beauty, shaded as it was, and made more lovely by the shadows of the night.

"Examine me very carefully," she went on, with bitter sarcasm, "look into my features and study my form and carriage, or you may be disappointed with your bargain, and complain that you have not got your money's worth. Remember, too, that an accident, an illness, and at the best the passage of a few years, may quite spoil my value as a beautiful woman, and reflect, before I take you at your word."

Philip had sat or rather crouched himself down upon the log of a tree that lay outside the summer-house, and covered his face with his hand, as though her loveliness was more than he could bear to look upon. Now, however, he raised his eyes and let them dwell upon her scornful features.

"I had rather," he said slowly--"I had rather lose my life than lose you; I love you so that I would buy you at the price even of my honour. When will you marry me?"

"What, have you made up your mind so quickly? Are you sure? Then,"--and here she changed her whole tone and bearing, and passionately stretched out her arms towards him,--"my dearest Philip, my life, my love, I will marry you when you will."

"To-morrow?"

"To-morrow, if you like!"

"You must promise me something first."

"What is it?"

"That you will keep the marriage a complete secret, and bear another name until my father's death. If you do not, he will most probably disinherit me."

"I do not like your terms, Philip. I do not like secret marriages; but you are giving up much to marry me, so I suppose I must give up something to marry you."

"You solemnly promise that nothing shall induce you to reveal that you

are my wife until I give you permission to do so?"

"I promise--that is, provided you do not force me to in self-defence."

Philip laughed.

"You need not fear that," he said. "But how shall we arrange about getting married?"

"I can meet you in London."

"Very well. I will go up early to-morrow, and get a licence, and then on Wednesday I can meet you, and we can be married."

"As you will, Philip; where shall I meet you?"

He gave her an address which she carefully noted down.

"Now," she said, "you must go, it is late. Yes, you may kiss me now. There, that will do, now go." In another minute he was gone.

"I have won the game," she mused; "poor Maria. I am sorry for her, but perhaps hers is the better part. She will get over it, but mine is a sad fate; I love passionately, madly, but I do not trust the man I love. Why should our marriage be so secret? He cannot be entangled with Maria, or she would have told me." And she stretched out her arms

towards the path by which he had left her, and cried aloud, in the native tongue that sounded so soft upon her lips, "Oh, my heart's darling! if I could only trust you as well as I love you, it is a happy woman that I should be to-night."