

CHAPTER VIII

Mrs. Trefusis found her parents so unsympathetic on the subject of her marriage that she left their house shortly after her visit to Lyvern, and went to reside with a hospitable friend. Unable to remain silent upon the matter constantly in her thoughts, she discussed her husband's flight with this friend, and elicited an opinion that the behavior of Trefusis was scandalous and wicked. Henrietta could not bear this, and sought shelter with a relative. The same discussion arising, the relative said:

"Well, Hetty, if I am to speak candidly, I must say that I have known Sidney Trefusis for a long time, and he is the easiest person to get on with I ever met. And you know, dear, that you are very trying sometimes."

"And so," cried Henrietta, bursting into tears, "after the infamous way he has treated me I am to be told that it is all my own fault."

She left the house next day, having obtained another invitation from a discreet lady who would not discuss the subject at all. This proved quite intolerable, and Henrietta went to stay with her uncle Daniel Jansenius, a jolly and indulgent man. He opined that things would come right as soon as both parties grew more sensible; and, as to which of them was, in fault, his verdict was, six of one and half a dozen of the other. Whenever he saw his niece pensive or tearful he laughed at her and called her a grass widow. Henrietta found that she could endure anything rather than this. Declaring that the world was hateful to her, she hired a furnished villa in St. John's Wood, whither she moved in December. But, suffering much there from loneliness, she soon wrote a pathetic letter to Agatha, entreating her to spend the approaching Christmas vacation with her, and promising her every luxury and amusement that boundless affection could suggest and boundless means procure. Agatha's reply contained some unlooked-for information.

"Alton College, Lyvern,

"14th December.

"Dearest Hetty: I don't think I can do exactly what you want, as I must spend Xmas with Mamma at Chiswick; but I need not get there until Xmas Eve, and we break up here on yesterday week, the 20th. So I will go straight to you and bring you with me to Mamma's, where you will spend Xmas much better than moping in a strange house. It is not quite settled yet about my leaving the college after this term. You must promise not to tell anyone; but I have a new friend here--a lover. Not that I am in love with him, though I think very highly of him--you know I am not a romantic fool; but he is very much in love with me; and I wish I could return it as he deserves. The French say that one person turns the cheek and the other kisses it. It has not got quite so far as that with us; indeed, since he declared what he felt he has only been able to snatch a few words with me when I have been skating or walking. But there has always been at least one word or look that meant a great deal.

"And now, who do you think he is? He says he knows you. Can you guess? He says you know all his secrets. He says he knows your husband well; that he treated you very badly, and that you are greatly to be pitied. Can you guess now? He says he has kissed you--for shame, Hetty! Have you guessed yet? He was going to tell me something more when we were interrupted, and I have not seen him since except at a distance. He is the man with whom you eloped that day when you gave us all such a fright--Mr. Sidney. I was the first to penetrate his disguise; and that very morning I had taxed him with it, and he had confessed it. He said then that he was hiding from a woman who was in love with him; and I should not be surprised if it turned out to be true; for he is wonderfully original--in fact what makes me like him is that he is by far the cleverest man I have ever met; and yet he thinks nothing of himself. I cannot imagine what he sees in me to care for, though he is evidently ensnared by my charms. I hope he won't find out how silly I am. He called me his golden idol--"

Henrietta, with a scream of rage, tore the letter across, and stamped upon it. When the paroxysm subsided she picked up the pieces, held them together as accurately as her trembling hands could, and read on.

"--but he is not all honey, and will say the most severe things sometimes if he thinks he ought to. He has made me so ashamed of my ignorance that I am resolved to stay here for another term at least, and study as hard as I can. I have not begun yet, as it is not worth while at the eleventh hour of this term; but when I return in January I will set to work in earnest. So you may see that his influence over me is an entirely good one. I will tell you all about him when we meet; for I have no time to say anything now, as the girls are bothering me to go skating with them. He pretends to be a workman, and puts on our skates for us; and Jane Carpenter believes that he is in love with her. Jane is exceedingly kindhearted; but she has a talent for making herself ridiculous that nothing can suppress. The ice is lovely, and the weather jolly; we do not mind the cold in the least. They are threatening to go without me--good-bye!

"Ever your affectionate

"Agatha."

Henrietta looked round for something sharp. She grasped a pair of scissors greedily and stabbed the air with them. Then she became conscious of her murderous impulse, and she shuddered at it; but in a moment more her jealousy swept back upon her. She cried, as if suffocating, "I don't care; I should like to kill her!" But she did not take up the scissors again.

At last she rang the bell violently and asked for a railway guide. On being told that there was not one in the house, she scolded her maid so unreasonably that the girl said pertly that if she were to be spoken to like that she should wish to leave when her month was up. This check brought Henrietta to her senses. She went upstairs and put on the first cloak at hand, which was fortunately a heavy fur one. Then she took her bonnet and purse, left the house, hailed a passing hansom, and bade the cabman drive her to St. Pancras.

When the night came the air at Lyvern was like iron in the intense cold. The trees and the wind seemed ice-bound, as the water was, and silence, stillness, and starlight, frozen hard, brooded over the country. At the chalet, Smilash, indifferent to the price of coals, kept up a roaring fire that glowed through the uncurtained windows, and tantalized the chilled wayfarer who did not happen to know, as the herdsmen of the neighborhood did, that he was welcome to enter and warm himself without risk of rebuff from the tenant. Smilash was in high spirits. He had become a proficient skater, and frosty weather was now a luxury to him. It braced him, and drove away his gloomy fits, whilst his sympathies were kept awake and his indignation maintained at an exhilarating pitch by the sufferings of the poor, who, unable to afford fires or skating, warmed themselves in such sweltering heat as overcrowding produces in all seasons.

It was Smilash's custom to make a hot drink of oatmeal and water for himself at half-past nine o'clock each evening, and to go to bed at ten. He opened the door to throw out some water that remained in the saucepan from its last cleansing. It froze as it fell upon the soil. He looked at the night, and shook himself to throw off an oppressive sensation of being clasped in the icy ribs of the air, for the mercury had descended below the familiar region of crisp and crackly cold and marked a temperature at which the numb atmosphere seemed on the point of congealing into black solidity. Nothing was stirring.

"By George!" he said, "this is one of those nights on which a rich man daren't think!"

He shut the door, hastened back to his fire, and set to work at his caudle, which he watched and stirred with a solicitude that would have amused a professed cook. When it was done he poured it into a large mug, where it steamed invitingly. He took up some in a spoon and blew upon it to cool it. Tap, tap, tap, tap! hurriedly at the door.

"Nice night for a walk," he said, putting down the spoon; then shouting, "Come in."

The latch rose unsteadily, and Henrietta, with frozen tears on her cheeks, and an unintelligible expression of wretchedness and rage, appeared. After an instant of amazement, he sprang to her and clasped her in his arms, and she, against her will, and protesting voicelessly, stumbled into his embrace.

"You are frozen to death," he exclaimed, carrying her to the fire. "This seal jacket is like a sheet of ice. So is your face" (kissing it). "What is the matter? Why do you struggle so?"

"Let me go," she gasped, in a vehement whisper. "I h--hate you."

"My poor love, you are too cold to hate anyone-- even your husband. You must let me take off these atrocious French boots. Your feet must be perfectly dead."

By this time her voice and tears were thawing in the warmth of the chalet and of his caresses. "You shall not take them off," she said, crying with cold and sorrow. "Let me alone. Don't touch me. I am going away--straight back. I will not speak to you, nor take off my things here, nor touch anything in the house."

"No, my darling," he said, putting her into a capacious wooden armchair and busily unbuttoning her boots, "you shall do nothing that you don't wish to do. Your feet are like stones. Yes, yes, my dear, I am a wretch unworthy to live. I know it."

"Let me alone," she said piteously. "I don't want your attentions. I have done with you for ever."

"Come, you must drink some of this nasty stuff. You will need strength to tell your husband all the unpleasant things your soul is charged with. Take just a little."

She turned her face away and would not answer. He brought another chair and sat down beside her. "My lost, forlorn, betrayed one--"

"I am," she sobbed. "You don't mean it, but I am."

"You are also my dearest and best of wives. If you ever loved me, Hetty, do, for my once dear sake, drink this before it gets cold."

She pouted, sobbed, and yielded to some gentle force which he used, as a child allows herself to be half persuaded, half compelled, to take physic.

"Do you feel better and more comfortable now?" he said.

"No," she replied, angry with herself for feeling both.

"Then," he said cheerfully, as if she had uttered a hearty affirmative, "I will put some more coals on the fire, and we shall be as snug as possible. It makes me wildly happy to see you at my fireside, and to know that you are my own wife."

"I wonder how you can look me in the face and say so," she cried.

"I should wonder at myself if I could look at your face and say anything else. Oatmeal is a capital restorative; all your energy is coming back. There, that will make a magnificent blaze presently."

"I never thought you deceitful, Sidney, whatever other faults you might have had."

"Precisely, my love. I understand your feelings. Murder, burglary, intemperance, or the minor vices you could have borne; but deceit you cannot abide."

"I will go away," she said despairingly, with a fresh burst of tears. "I will not be laughed at and betrayed. I will go barefooted." She rose and attempted to reach the door; but he intercepted her and said:

"My love, there is something serious the matter. What is it? Don't be angry with me."

He brought her back to the chair. She took Agatha's letter from the pocket of her fur cloak, and handed it to him with a faint attempt to be tragic.

"Read that," she said. "And never speak to me again. All is over between us."

He took it curiously, and turned it to look at the signature. "Aha!" he said, "my golden idol has been making mischief, has she?"

"There!" exclaimed Henrietta. "You have said it to my face! You have convicted yourself out of your own mouth!"

"Wait a moment, my dear. I have not read the letter yet."

He rose and walked to and fro through the room, reading. She watched him, angrily confident that she should presently see him change countenance. Suddenly he drooped as if his spine had partly given way; and in this ungraceful attitude he read the remainder of the letter. When he had finished he threw it on the table, thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and roared with laughter, huddling himself together as if he could concentrate the joke by collecting himself into the smallest possible compass. Henrietta, speechless with indignation, could only look her feelings. At last he came and sat down beside her.

"And so," he said, "on receiving this you rushed out in the cold and came all the way to Lyvern. Now, it seems to me that you must either love me very much- -"

"I don't. I hate you."

"Or else love yourself very much."

"Oh!" And she wept afresh. "You are a selfish brute, and you do just as you like without considering anyone else. No one ever thinks of me. And now you won't even take the trouble to deny that shameful letter."

"Why should I deny it? It is true. Do you not see the irony of all this? I amuse myself by paying a few compliments to a schoolgirl for whom I do not care two straws more than for any agreeable and passably clever woman I meet. Nevertheless, I occasionally feel a pang of remorse because I think that she may love me seriously, although I am only playing with her. I pity the poor heart I have wantonly ensnared. And, all the time, she is pitying me for exactly the same reason! She is conscience-stricken because she is only indulging in the luxury of being adored 'by far the cleverest man she has ever met,' and is as heart-whole as I am! Ha, ha! That is the basis of the religion of love of which poets are the high-priests. Each worshipper knows that his own love is either a transient passion or a sham copied from his favorite poem; but he believes honestly in the love of others for him. Ho, ho! Is it not a silly world, my dear?"

"You had no right to make love to Agatha. You have no right to make love to anyone but me; and I won't bear it."

"You are angry because Agatha has infringed your monopoly. Always monopoly! Why, you silly girl, do you

suppose that I belong to you, body and soul?--that I may not be moved except by your affection, or think except of your beauty?"

"You may call me as many names as you please, but you have no right to make love to Agatha."

"My dearest, I do not recollect calling you any names. I think you said something about a selfish brute."

"I did not. You called me a silly girl."

"But, my love, you are."

"And so YOU are. You are thoroughly selfish."

"I don't deny it. But let us return to our subject. What did we begin to quarrel about?"

"I am not quarrelling, Sidney. It is you."

"Well, what did I begin to quarrel about?"

"About Agatha Wylie."

"Oh, pardon me, Hetty; I certainly did not begin to quarrel about her. I am very fond of her--more so, it appears, than she is of me. One moment, Hetty, before you recommence your reproaches. Why do you dislike my saying pretty things to Agatha?"

Henrietta hesitated, and said: "Because you have no right to. It shows how little you care for me."

"It has nothing to do with you. It only shows how much I care for her."

"I will not stay here to be insulted," said Hetty, her distress returning. "I will go home."

"Not to-night; there is no train."

"I will walk."

"It is too far."

"I don't care. I will not stay here, though I die of cold by the roadside."

"My cherished one, I have been annoying you purposely because you show by your anger that you have not ceased to care for me. I am in the wrong, as I usually am, and it is all my fault. Agatha knows nothing about our marriage."

"I do not blame you so much," said Henrietta, suffering him to place her head on his shoulder; "but I will never speak to Agatha again. She has behaved shamefully to me, and I will tell her so."

"No doubt she will opine that it is all your fault, dearest, and that I have behaved admirably. Between you I shall stand exonerated. And now, since it is too cold for walking, since it is late, since it is far to Lyvern and farther to London, I must improvise some accommodation for you here."

"But--"

"But there is no help for it. You must stay."