

EVERETT-GREEN EVELYN

**MONICA, VOLUME 2
(OF 3)**

Evelyn Everett-Green
Monica, Volume 2 (of 3)

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Evelyn Everett-Green

Monica, Volume 2 (of 3) / A Novel

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH.

MRS. BELLAMY

Randolph was gone; and Monica, left alone in her luxurious London house, felt strangely lost and desolate. Her husband had expressed a wish that she should go out as much as possible, and not shut herself up in solitude during his brief absence, and to do his will was now her great desire. She would have preferred to remain quietly at home. She liked best to sit by her fire upstairs, and make Wilberforce tell her of Randolph's childhood and boyish days; his devotion to his widowed mother, his kindness to herself, all the deeds of youthful prowess, which an old nurse treasures up respecting her youthful charges and delights to repeat in after years. Wilberforce would talk of Randolph by the hour together if she were not checked, and Monica felt singularly little disposition to check her.

However she obeyed her husband in everything, and took her morning's ride as usual next day, and was met by Cecilia Bellamy, who rode beside her, with her train of cavaliers in attendance, and pitied the poor darling child who had been deserted by her husband.

"I am just in the same sad predicament myself, Monica," she said, plaintively. "My husband has had to go to Paris, all of a sudden, and I am left alone too. We must console ourselves together. You must drive with me to-day and come to tea, and I will come to you to-morrow."

Monica tried in vain to beg off; Cecilia only laughed at her. Monica had not *savoir faire* enough to parry skilful thrusts, nor insincerity enough to plead engagements that did not exist. So she was monopolised by Mrs. Bellamy in her morning's ride, was driven out in her carriage that same afternoon, and taken to several houses where her friend had "just a few words" to say to the hostess. She was taken back to tea, and had to meet Conrad, who received her with great warmth, and had the bad taste to address her by her Christian name before a whole roomful of company, and who ended by insisting on walking home with her. Yet his manner was so quiet and courteous, and he seemed so utterly unconscious of her disfavour, that she was half ashamed of it, despite her very real annoyance.

And the worst of it was that there seemed no end to the attentions pressed upon her by the indefatigable Cecilia. Monica did not know how to escape from the manifold invitations and visits that were showered upon her. She seemed fated to be for ever in the society of Mrs. Bellamy and her friends. Beatrice Wentworth and her brother were themselves out of town; Randolph was detained longer than he had at first anticipated, and Monica found herself drawn in an imperceptible way – against which she rebelled in vain – into quite a new set of people and places.

Monica was a mere baby in Cecilia's hands. She had not the faintest idea of any malice on the part of her friend. She felt her attentions oppressive; she disliked the constant encounters with Conrad; but she tried in vain to free herself from the hospitable tyranny of the gay little woman. She was caught in some inexplicable way, and without downright rudeness she could not escape.

As a rule, Conrad was very guarded and discreet, especially when alone with her. He often annoyed her by his assumption of familiarity in presence of others, but he was humble enough for the most part, and took no umbrage at her rather pointed avoidance of him. She did not know what he was trying to do: how he was planning a subtle revenge upon his enemy her husband – the husband she was beginning unconsciously yet very truly to love. She shrank from him without knowing why, but the day was rapidly approaching when her eyes were to be opened.

Her instincts were so true that it was not easy to deceive her for long. Ignorance of the world and reluctance to suspect evil blinded her for a time; but she was to learn the true nature of her so-called friends before long.

There had been a small picnic party at Richmond one day. Monica had tried hard to excuse herself from attending, but had been laughed and coaxed into consent. It mattered the less what she did now, for her husband was to be at home the following day, and in the gladness of that thought she could almost enjoy the sunshine, the fresh air, the sight of green grass and waving trees, the country sights and sounds to which she had so long been a stranger.

The party, too, was small, and though Conrad was of the number, he held aloof from Monica, for which she was glad, for she had felt an increasing distrust of him of late. It was an equestrian party, and the long ride was a pleasure to Monica, who could have spent a whole day in the saddle without fatigue.

And then her husband was coming. He would set all right. She would tell him everything – she had not felt able to do so in the little brief notes she had written to him – and she would take his advice for the future, and decline friendship with all who could not be his friends too. Everything would be right when Randolph came back.

Then Monica was glad of an opportunity of a little quiet talk with Cecilia Bellamy. The wish for a private interview with her had been one of the reasons which had led her to consent to be one of to-day's party. She had something on her mind she wished to say to her in private, and as yet she had found no opportunity of doing so.

Yet it was not until quite late in the afternoon that Monica's opportunity came; when it did, she availed herself of it at once. She and her friend were alone in a quiet part of the park; nobody was very near to them.

"Cecilia," said Monica, "there is something I wish to say to you now that we are alone together. I am very much obliged to you for being so friendly during my husband's absence – but – but – it is difficult to say what I mean – but I think you ought not to have had your brother so much with you when you were asking me; or rather I think, as he is your brother, whilst I am only a friend, the best plan would be for us to agree not to attempt to be very intimate. We have drifted apart with the lapse of years, and there are reasons, as you know, why it is not advisable for me to see much of your brother. I am sure you understand me without any more words."

"Oh, perfectly!" said Mrs. Bellamy with a light laugh. "Poor child, what an ogre he is! Well, at least, we have made the best of the little time he allowed us."

Monica drew herself up very straight.

"I do not understand you, Cecilia. Please to remember that you are speaking of my husband."

Mrs. Bellamy laughed again.

"I am in no danger of forgetting, my dear. Please do not trouble yourself to put on such old-fashioned airs with me; as if every one did not know your secret by this time."

Monica turned upon her with flashing eyes.

"What secret?"

"The secret of your unhappy marriage, my love. It was obviously a *mariage de convenance* from the first, and you take no pains to disguise the fact that it will never be anything else. As Randolph Trevlyn is rather a fascinating man, there is only one rational interpretation to be put upon your persistent indifference."

Monica stood as if turned to stone.

"What?"

"Why, that your heart was given away before he appeared on the scene. People like little pathetic romances, and there is something in the style of your beauty, my dear, that makes you an object of interest wherever you go. You are universally credited with a 'history' and a slowly breaking heart

– an equally heart-broken lover in the background. You can't think how interested we all are in you – and – ”

But the sentence was not finished. Mrs. Bellamy's perceptions were not fine, but something in Monica's face deterred her from permitting her brother's name to pass her lips. It was easy to see that no suspicion of his connection with the “romance” concocted for her by gossiping tongues had ever crossed her mind. But she was sternly indignant, and wounded to the quick by what she had heard.

She spoke not a word, but turned haughtily away and sought for solitude in the loneliest part of the park. She was terribly humiliated. She knew nothing of the inevitable chatter and gossip, half good-humoured, half mischievous, with which idle people indulge themselves about their neighbours, especially if that neighbour happens to be a beautiful woman, with an unknown past and an apparent trouble upon her. She did not know that spite on Conrad's part, and flighty foolishness on that of his sister, had started rumours concerning her. She only felt that she had by her ingratitude and coolness towards the husband who had sacrificed so much for her, and whom she sincerely respected, and almost loved, had been the means of bringing his name and hers within the reach of malicious tongues, had given rise to cruel false rumours she hated ever to think of. If only her husband were with her! – at least he would soon be with her, and if for very shame she could not repeat the cruel words she had heard, at least she could show to all the world how false and base they were.

Monica woke up at last to the fact that it was getting late, and that she was in a totally strange place, far away from the rest of the party. She turned quickly and retraced her steps. She seldom lost her bearings, and was able to find her way back without difficulty, but she had strayed farther than she knew; it took her some time to reach the glade in which they had lunched, and when she arrived there she found it quite deserted. There was nothing for it but to go back to the hotel, whither she supposed the others had preceded her, but when she reached the courtyard no one was to be seen but Conrad, who held her horse and his own.

“Ah, Monica! here you are. We missed you just at starting. Did you lose yourself in the park? Nobody seemed to know what had become of you.”

“I suppose I walked rather too far. Where are the rest?”

“Just started five minutes ago. We only missed you then. I said I'd wait. We shall catch them up in two minutes.”

As this was Mrs. Bellamy's party, and Conrad was her brother, this mark of courtesy could not be called excessive, yet somehow it displeased Monica a good deal.

“Where is my groom?”

Conrad looked round innocently enough. “I suppose he joined the cavalcade, stupid fellow! Stablemen are so very gregarious. Never mind; we shall be up with them directly.”

And Monica was forced to mount and ride after the party with Conrad.

But they did not come up with the others, despite his assurances, and the fact that they rode very fast for a considerable time. He professed himself very much astonished, and declared that they must have made a stupid blunder, and have gone by some other road.

“In that case, Sir Conrad,” said Monica, “I will dispense with your escort. I am perfectly well able to take care of myself alone.”

He read her displeasure in her face and voice. She had an instinct that she had been tricked, but it was not a suspicion she could put into words.

“*Sir* Conrad!” he repeated, with gentle reproach. “Have I offended you, Monica?”

“Sir Conrad, it is time we should understand one another,” said Monica, turning her head towards him. “I made you a sort of promise once – a promise of friendship I believe it was. I am not certain that I ever ought to have given it; but after my marriage with a man you hold as an enemy, it is impossible that I can look upon you as a true friend. I do not judge or condemn you, but I do say that we had better meet as infrequently as possible, and then as mere acquaintances. You have strained your right of friendship, as it is, by the unwarrantable and persistent use of my Christian name, which

you must have known was not for you to employ now. We were playfellows in childhood, I know, but circumstances alter cases, and our circumstances have greatly changed. It must be Sir Conrad and Lady Monica now between you and me, if ever we meet in future.”

His eyes gleamed with that wild beast ferocity that lay latent in his nature, but his voice was well under command.

“Your will is law, Lady Monica. It is hard on me, but you know best. I will accept any place that you assign me.”

She was not disarmed by his humility.

“I assign you no place; and you know that what I say is not hard. We are not at Trevlyn now. You know your own world well; I am only just beginning to know it. You had no right ever to take liberties that could give occasion for criticism or remark.”

He looked keenly at her, but she was evidently quite unconscious of the game he had tried to play for the amusement of his little circle. She only spoke in general terms.

“There was a time, Monica,” he said gently, “when you cared less what the world would say.”

“There was a time, Sir Conrad,” she answered, with quiet dignity, “when I knew less what the world might say.”

Had Monica had the least suspicion of what her companion had tried to make it say, she would not now have been riding with him along the darkening streets, just as carriages were rolling by carrying people to dinner or to the theatres.

Twice she had imperatively dismissed him, but he had absolutely declined to leave her.

“I will not address another word to you if my presence is distasteful to you,” he said; “but you are my sister’s guest, and in the absence of her husband I stand in the place of your host. I will not leave you to ride home at this late hour alone. At the risk of incurring your displeasure I attend you to your own door.”

Monica did not protest after that, but she hardly addressed a single word to her silent companion.

As she rode up to her own house she saw that the door stood open. The groom was there, with his horse. He was in earnest converse with a tall, broad-shouldered man, who held a hunting-whip in his hand, and appeared about to spring into the saddle.

Monica’s heart gave a sudden leap. Who was that other man standing with his back to her on the pavement? He turned quickly at the sound of her approach – it was her husband.

He looked at her and her companion in perfect silence. Conrad took off his hat, murmured a few incoherent words, and rode quickly away. Randolph’s hand closed like a vice upon his whip, but he only gave one glance at the retreating figure, and then turned quietly to his wife and helped her to dismount. The groom took the horse, and without a word from anyone, husband and wife passed together into the house. And this was the meeting to which Monica had looked forward with so much trembling joy.

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH. RANDOLPH'S STORY

Randolph led his wife upstairs to the drawing-room, and closed the door behind them. It was nine o'clock, and the room was brightly illuminated. Randolph was in dinner dress, as though he had been some time at home. His face was pale, and wore an expression of stern repression more intense than anything Monica had ever seen there before. She was profoundly agitated – agitated most of all by the feeling that he was near her again; the husband that she had pined for without knowing that she pined. Her agitation was due to a kind of tumultuous joy more than to any other feeling, but she hardly knew this herself, and no one else would have credited it, from the whiteness of her face, and the strained look it wore. As a matter of fact, she was physically and mentally exhausted. She had gone through a great deal that day; she had eaten little, and that many hours ago; she was a good deal prostrated, though hardly aware of it – a state in which nervous tension made her unusually susceptible of impression; and she trembled and shrank before the displeasure in her husband's proud face. Would he look like that if he really loved her? Ah, no! no! She shrank a little more into herself.

Randolph did not hurry her. He took off his overcoat leisurely, and laid his whip down upon the table. He looked once or twice at her as she sat pale and wan in the arm-chair whither he had led her. Then he came and stood before her.

“Monica, what have you to say to me?”

She looked up at him with an expression in her dark eyes that moved and touched him. Something of the severity passed from his face; he sat down, too, and laid his hand upon hers.

“You poor innocent child,” he said quietly, “I do not even believe you know that you have done wrong.”

“I do, Randolph,” she answered. “I do know, but not as you think – I could not help that. I hated it – I hate him; but to-night I could not help myself. Where I was wrong was in not doing as you asked – persisting in judging for myself. But how could I know that people could be so cruel, so unworthy, so false? Randolph, I should like to-night to know that I should never see one of them again!”

She spoke with a passionate energy that startled him. He had never seen her excited like this before.

“What have they been saying to you?” he asked in surprise.

“Ah! don't ask me. It is too hateful! It was Cecilia. She seemed to think it was amusing – a capital joke. Ah! how can people be so unwomanly, so debased!”

She put her hands before her eyes, as if to shut out some hideous image. “Yes, I will tell you, Randolph – I will. I owe it to you, because – because – oh, because there is just enough truth to make it so terribly bitter. She said that people knew it was not an ordinary marriage, ours – she called it a *mariage de convenance*. She said everybody knew we had not fallen in love with one another.” Monica's hand was still pressed over her eyes; she could not look at her husband. “She said I showed it plainly, that I let every one see. I never meant to, Randolph, but perhaps I did. I don't know how to pretend. But oh, she said people thought it was because I cared – for some one else – that I had married you whilst I loved some one else – and that is all a wicked, wicked lie! You believe that, Randolph, do you not?”

She rose up suddenly and he rose too, and they stood looking into each other's eyes.

“You believe that at least, Randolph?” she asked, and wondered at the stern sorrow visible in every line of his face.

“Yes, Monica, I believe that,” he answered, very quietly; yet, in spite of all his yearning tenderness there was still some sternness in his manner, for he was deeply moved, and knew that the time had come when at all costs he must speak out. “I, too, have heard that false rumour, and have

heard – which I hope you have not – the name of the man to whom your heart is supposed to be given. Shall I tell it you? His name is Conrad Fitzgerald.”

Monica recoiled as if he had struck her, and put both her hands before her face. Randolph continued speaking in the same concise way.

“Let me tell you my tale now, Monica. I left Scotland early this morning, finishing business twelve hours earlier than I expected. I wired from Durham to you; but you had left the house before my telegram reached. In the train, during the last hour of the journey, some young fellows got in, who were amusing themselves by idle repetition of current gossip. I heard my wife’s name mentioned more than once, coupled with that of Sir Conrad Fitzgerald, in whose company she had evidently been frequently seen of late. I reached home – Lady Monica was out for the day with Mrs. Bellamy – presumably with Sir Conrad also. I dined at my club, to hear from more than one source that the world was gossiping about my handsome wife and Sir Conrad Fitzgerald. I came home at dusk to find the groom just returned, with the news that Sir Conrad was bringing my lady home, that he was dismissed from attendance; and in effect the man whose acquaintance I repudiate, whose presence in my house is an insult, rides up to my door in attendance upon my wife. Before I say any more, tell me your story. Monica, let me hear what you have been doing whilst I have been away.”

Monica, roused to a passionate indignation by what she heard – an indignation that for the moment seemed to include the husband, who had uttered such cruel, wounding words, told her story with graphic energy. She was grateful to Randolph for listening so calmly and so patiently. She was vaguely aware that not all men would show such forbearance and self-control. She knew she had wounded him to the quick by her indiscretion and self-will, but he gave her every chance to exculpate herself. When she had told her story, she stood up very straight before him. Let him pronounce sentence upon her; she would bear it patiently if she could.

“I see, Monica,” he answered, very quietly, “I understand. It is not all your fault. You have only been unguarded. You have been an innocent victim. It is Fitzgerald’s own false tongue that has set on foot these idle, baseless rumours. It is just like him.”

Monica recoiled again.

“Just like him! but, Randolph, he is my friend!”

A stern look settled upon Randolph’s face.

“Oblige me, Monica, by withdrawing that word. He is *not* your friend; and he is my enemy.”

“Your enemy?”

“Yes; and *this* is how he tries to obtain his revenge.”

Monica was trembling in every limb.

“I do not understand,” she said.

“Sit down, then, and I will tell you.”

She obeyed, but he did not sit down. He stood with his back against the chimney-piece, the light from the chandelier falling full upon his stern resolute face, with its handsome features and luminous dark eyes.

“You say you know the story of Fitzgerald’s past?”

“Yes; he forged a cheque. His sister told me.”

Randolph looked at her intently.

“Was that *all* she told you?”

“Yes; she said it was all. He deceived a friend and benefactor, and committed a crime. Was not that enough?”

“Not enough for Fitzgerald, it seemed,” answered Randolph, significantly. “Monica, I am glad you did not know more, since you have met that man as a friend. Forgiveness is beautiful and noble – but there are limits. I will tell you the whole story, but in brief. The Colonel Hamilton of whom you heard in connection with the forgery was Fitzgerald’s best and kindest friend. He was a friend of my mother’s and of mine. I knew him intimately, and saw a good deal of his *protégé* at his house

and at Oxford. I did not trust him at any time. It was no very great surprise when, after a carefully concealed course of vulgar dissipation, he ended by disgracing himself in the way you have heard described. It cut Hamilton to the quick. ‘Why did not the lad come to me if he was in trouble? I would have helped him,’ he said. He let me into the secret, for I happened to be staying with him at the time; but it was all hushed up. Fitzgerald was forgiven, and vowed an eternal gratitude, as well as a complete reformation in his life.”

“Did he keep his promise?” asked Monica in a whisper.

“You shall hear how,” answered Randolph, with a gathering sternness in his tone not lost upon Monica. “From that moment it seemed as if a demon possessed him. I believe – it is the only excuse or explanation to be offered – that there is a taint of insanity in his blood, and that with him it takes, or took, the form of an inexplicable hatred towards the man to whom he owed so much. About this time, Colonel Hamilton, till then a bachelor, married a friendless, beautiful young wife, to whom in his very quiet and undemonstrative way he was deeply and passionately attached, as she was to him. But she was very young and very inexperienced, and when that man, with his smooth false tongue, set himself to poison her life by filling her mind with doubts of her husband’s love, he succeeded but too well. She spoke no word of what she suffered, but withdrew herself in her morbid jealous distress. She broke the faithful heart that loved her, and she broke her own too. It sounds a wild and foolish tale, perhaps, to one who does not understand the mysteries of a passionate love such as that; but it is all too true. I had been absent from England for some time, but came home, all unconscious of what had happened, to find my friend Hamilton in terrible grief. His young wife lay dying – dying of a rapid decline, brought on, it was said, by mental distress; and worse than all, she could not endure her husband’s presence in the room, but shrank from him with inconceivable terror and excitement. He was utterly broken down by distress. He begged me to see her, and to learn if I could, the cause of this miserable alteration. I did see her. I did get her to tell her story. I heard what Conrad Fitzgerald had done; and I was able, I am thankful to say, to relieve her mind of its terrible fear, and to bring her husband to her before the end had come. She died in his arms, happy at the last; but she died; and he, in his broken-hearted misery for her loss, and for the treachery of one he had loved almost as a son, did not survive her for long. Within six months, my true, brave friend followed her to the grave.

“I was with him to the end. I need hardly say that Fitzgerald did not attempt to come near him. He was plunged in a round of riotous dissipation. Upon the day following the funeral, I chanced to come upon him, surrounded by a select following of his boon companions. Can I bring myself to tell you what he was saying before he knew that I was within earshot? I need not repeat his words, Monica: they are not fit for your ears. Suffice it to say that he was passing brutal jests upon the man who had just been laid in his grave, and upon the young wife whose heart had been broken by his own base and cruel slanders. Coupled with these jests were disgraceful boastings, as unmanly and false as the lips that uttered them.

“I had in my hand a heavy riding-whip. I took him by the collar, and I made him recant each one of those cruel slanders he had uttered, and confess himself a liar and a villain. I administered, then and there, such a chastisement as I hope never to have to administer to any man again. No one interposed between us. I think even his chosen companions felt that he was receiving no more than his due. I thrashed him like the miserable hound he was. If it had been possible, I would have called him out and shot him like a dog.”

Randolph’s voice had not risen whilst he was speaking. He was very calm and composed as he told his story; there was no excitement in his manner, and yet his quiet, quivering wrath thrilled Monica more than the fiercest invective could have done.

“My whip broke at last. I flung him from me, and he lay writhing on the floor. But he was not past speech, and he had energy left still to curse me to my face, and to vow upon me a terrible vengeance, which should follow me all my life. He is trying now to keep this vow. History repeats itself you know. He ruined the happiness of one life, and brought about this tragedy, by poisoning

the mind of a wife, and setting her against her husband; and I presume he thinks that experiment was successful enough to be worth repeating. There, Monica, I have said my say. You have now before you a circumstantial history of the past life of Sir Conrad Fitzgerald – your friend.”

CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH. STORM AND CALM

Monica sat with her face buried in her hands, her whole frame quivering with emotion. Those last words of her husband's smote her almost like a blow. She deserved them, no doubt; yet they were cruel, coming like that. He could not have spoken so if he loved her. He would not stand coldly aloof whilst she suffered, if he held her really dear. And yet, once he had almost seemed to love her, till she had alienated him by her pride and self-will. It was just, she admitted, yet, oh! it was very hard!

She sat, crushed and confounded, for a time, and it was only by a great effort that she spoke at all.

"I did not know, Randolph; I did not know. You should have told me before."

"I believed you did know. You told me that you did."

"Not that. Did you think I could know *that* and treat him as a friend? Oh, Randolph! how could you? You ought to have told me before."

"Perhaps I ought," he said. "But remember, Monica, I spoke out very plainly, and still you insisted that he was, and should continue to be, your friend – your repentant friend."

Monica raised her eyes to her husband's face, full of a sort of mute reproach. She felt that she merited the rebuke – that he might have said much more without being really harsh – and yet it was very hard, in this hour of their re-union, to have to hear, from lips that had never uttered till then anything but words of gentleness and love, these reproofs and strictures on her conduct. She saw that he was moved: that there was a repressed agitation and excitement in his whole manner; but she could not guess how deeply he had been roused and stirred by the careless jests he had heard passed that day, nor how burning an indignation he felt towards the man who had plotted to ruin his happiness.

"You should not have left me, Randolph," said Monica, "if you could not trust me."

He went up to her quietly, and took her hands. She stood up, looking straight into his eyes.

"I did trust you – I do trust you," he answered, with subdued impetuosity. "Can I look into your face and harbour one doubt of your goodness and truth? I trust *you* implicitly; it is your judgment, not your heart, that has been at fault."

She looked up gratefully, and drew one step nearer.

"And now that you have come back, all will be right again," she said. "Randolph, I will never speak to that man again."

His face was stern; it wore a look she did not understand.

"I am not sure of that," he answered, speaking with peculiar incisiveness. "It may be best that you *should* speak to him again."

She looked up, bewildered.

"Randolph, why do you say that? Do you think that, after all, he has repented?"

Randolph's face expressed an unutterable scorn. She read the meaning of that glance, and answered it as if it had been expressed in words.

"Randolph, do you believe for a moment that I would permit any one to speak ill of you to me? Am I not your wife?"

His face softened as he looked at her, but there was a good deal of sadness there, too.

"I do not believe you would deliberately listen to such words from him; but are not poisoned shafts launched sometimes that strike home and rankle? Has no one ever come between you and me, since the day you gave yourself to me in marriage?"

He saw her hesitation, and a great sadness came into his eyes. How near she was and yet how far! His heart ached for her in her loneliness and isolation, and it ached for himself too.

Monica broke the silence first.

“Randolph,” she said timidly; “no harm has been done to you, really? He cannot hurt you; can he?”

His face was stern as he answered her.

“He will hurt me if he can – through my wife. His threat is still unfulfilled; but he knows where to plant a blow, how to strike in the dark. Yes, Monica, he has hurt me.”

She drew back a pace.

“How?”

“It hurts me to know that idle gossip connects my wife’s name with his – that he has the credit of being a lover, discarded only from motives of policy. I know that there is not a syllable of truth in these reports – that they have been set afloat by his malicious tongue. Nevertheless, they hurt me. They hurt me the more because my wife has given some countenance to such rumours, by permitting a certain amount of intimacy with a man whom her husband will not receive.”

Monica was white to the lips. She understood now, as she had never done before, what Cecilia Bellamy had meant by her flighty speeches a few hours before. They had disgusted and offended her then, now they appeared like absolute insults. Randolph saw the stricken look upon her face, and knew that she was cut to the quick.

“Monica,” he said, more gently, “what has been done can be undone by a little patience and self-control. We need not be afraid of a man like Sir Conrad. I have known him and his ways long. He has tried before to injure me without success. He has tried in a more subtle way this time; yet again I say, most emphatically, that he has failed.”

But Monica hardly heard. She was torn by the tumult of her shame and distress.

“Randolph!” she exclaimed, stretching out her hands towards him: “Randolph, take me home! oh! take me home, out of this cruel, cruel, wicked world! I cannot live here. It kills me; it stifles the very life out of me! I am so miserable, so desolate here! It is all so hard, and so terrible! Take me home! Ah! I was happy once!”

“I will take you to Trevlyn, Monica, believe me, as soon as ever I can; but it cannot be just yet. Shall I tell you why?”

She recoiled from him once more, putting up her hand with that instinctive gesture of distress.

“You are very cruel to me Randolph,” she said, with the sharpness of keen misery in her voice.

He stood quite still, looking at her, and then continued in the same quiet way:

“Shall I tell you why? I cannot take you away until we have been seen together as before. I shall go with you to some of those houses you have visited without me. We must be seen riding and driving, and going about as if nothing whatever had occurred during my absence. If we meet Fitzgerald, there must be nothing in your manner or in mine to indicate that he is otherwise than absolutely indifferent to us. I dare say he will put himself in your way. He would like to force upon me the part of the jealous, distrustful husband, but it is a *rôle* I decline to play at his bidding. I am not jealous, nor am I distrustful, and he and all the world shall see that this is so. If I take you away now, Monica, I shall give occasion for people to say that I am afraid to trust my wife in any place where she may meet Fitzgerald. Let us stay where we are, and ignore the foolish rumours he has circulated, and we shall soon see them drop into deserved oblivion.”

“Randolph, I cannot! I cannot!” cried Monica, who was now overwrought and agitated to the verge of exhaustion; “I *cannot* stay here. I cannot go amongst those who have dared to say such things, to believe such things of me. What does it matter what they think, when we are far away? Take me back to Trevlyn, and let us forget it all. Let me go, if only for a week. I have never asked you anything before. Oh! Randolph, do not be so hard! Say that you will take me home!”

“If I loved you less, Monica,” he answered, in a very low, gentle tone, “I should say yes. As it is, I say no. I cannot take you to Trevlyn yet.”

She turned away then, and left him without a word, passing slowly through the brilliantly-lighted room, and up the wide staircase. Randolph sat down and rested his head upon his hand, and a long-

drawn sigh rose up from the very depths of his heart. This interview had tried him quite as much as it had done Monica – possibly even more.

“Perhaps, after all, Fitzgerald *has* revenged himself,” he muttered, “though not in a way he anticipated. Ah, Monica! my fair young wife, why cannot you trust me a little more?”

Monica trusted him far more than he knew. It was not in anger that she had left him. In the depth of her heart she believed that he had judged wisely and well; it was only the wave of homesickness sweeping over her that had urged her to such passionate pleading. And then his strong, inflexible firmness gave her a curious sense of rest and confidence. She herself was so torn and rent by conflicting emotions, by bewilderment and uncertainty, that his resolute determination and singleness of purpose were as a rock and tower of defence. She had called him cruel in the keen disappointment of the moment, but she knew he was not really so. Home-sick, aching for Trevlyn as she was – irrepressibly as she shrank from the idea of facing those to whom she had given cause to say that she did not love her husband, she felt that his decision was right. It might be hard, but it was necessary, and she would go through her part unflinchingly for his sake. It was the least that she could do to make amends for the unconscious wrong she had done him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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