

**AMANDA
MCKITTRICK
ROS**

IRENE IDDESLEIGH

Amanda McKittrick Ros

Irene Iddesleigh

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	6
CHAPTER III	8
CHAPTER IV	10
CHAPTER V	12
CHAPTER VI	14
CHAPTER VII	17
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	19

Amanda McKittrick Ros

Irene Iddesleigh

CHAPTER I

SYMPATHISE with me, indeed! Ah, no! Cast your sympathy on the chill waves of troubled waters; fling it on the oases of futurity; dash it against the rock of gossip; or, better still, allow it to remain within the false and faithless bosom of buried scorn.

Such were a few remarks of Irene as she paced the beach of limited freedom, alone and unprotected. Sympathy can wound the breast of trodden patience,—it hath no rival to insure the feelings we possess, save that of sorrow.

The gloomy mansion stands firmly within the ivy-covered, stoutly-built walls of Dunfern, vast in proportion and magnificent in display. It has been built over three hundred years, and its structure stands respectably distant from modern advancement, and in some degrees it could boast of architectural designs rarely, if ever, attempted since its construction.

The entrance to this beautiful home of Sir Hugh Dunfern, the present owner, is planned on most antique principles; nothing save an enormous iron gate meets the gaze of the visitor, who at first is inclined to think that all public rumours relative to its magnificence are only the utterances of the boastful and idle; nor until within its winding paths of finest pebble, studded here and there with huge stones of unpolished granite, could the mind for a moment conceive or entertain the faintest idea of its quaint grandeur.

Beautiful, however, as Dunfern mansion may seem to the anxious eye of the beholder, yet it is not altogether free from mystery. Whilst many of its rooms, with walls of crystal, are gorgeously and profusely furnished, others are locked incessantly against the foot of the cautious intruder, having in them only a few traditional relics of no material consequence whatever, or even interest, to any outside the ancestral line of its occupants.

It has often been the chief subject of comment amongst the few distinguished visitors welcomed within its spacious apartments, why seemingly the finest rooms the mansion owned were always shut against their eager and scrutinizing gaze; or why, when referred to by any of them, the matter was always treated with silence.

All that can now be done is merely to allow the thought to dwindle into bleak oblivion, until aroused to that standard of disclosure which defies hindrance.

Within the venerable walls surrounding this erection of amazement and wonder may be seen species of trees rarely, if ever, met with; yea, within the beaded borders of this grand old mansion the eye of the privileged beholds the magnificent lake, studded on every side with stone of costliest cut and finish; the richest vineries, the most elegant ferns, the daintiest conservatories, the flowers and plants of almost every clime in abundance, the most fashionable walks, the most intricate windings that imagination could possibly conceive or genius contrive. In fact, it has well been named “The Eden of Luxury.”

Dunfern mansion was handed down as an heirloom since its purchase by Walter, third Earl of Dunfern, in 1674; and since then has been tenderly cared for internally, and carefully guarded externally, by the skilful hands of noted artisans. The present owner is only son of Sir John Dunfern, by Irene, adopted daughter of Lord and Lady Dilworth, of Dilworth Castle, County Kent.

CHAPTER II

THE December sun had hidden its dull rays behind the huge rocks that rose monstrously high west of Dunfern mansion, and ceased to gladden the superb apartment Sir John occupied most part of the day. They had withdrawn their faint reflection from within the mirrored walls of this solitary chamber to brighten other homes with their never-dying sheen.

As the dull, grey evening advanced to such a degree as to render a look of brightness imperative to the surroundings of its sole occupant, Sir John requested that his favourite apartment should be made bright as possible by adding more fuel to the smouldering ashes within the glistening bars which guarded their remains. This being done, three huge lamps were lighted, and placed at respectable distances from each other, when Sir John, with his accustomed grace, began to peruse some of his evening papers.

Though a man of forty summers, he never yet had entertained the thought of yielding up his bacheloric ideas to supplace them with others which eventually should coincide with those of a different sex; in fact, he never had bestowed a thought on changing his habits and manner of living, nor until fully realising his position of birthright, that had been treasured by his ancestors for such a lengthened period, and which, sooner or later, must pass into strangers' hands, did the thought ever occur to him of entering into the league of the blessed.

The clock had just chimed nine when a maid entered with a note, neatly laid on a trim little tray, which she placed on the table close beside her master, and then retired. It was rather unusual for him to receive letters so late in the evening, nor until he was in full possession of its contents he could not form the faintest imagination of its worth.

Not far from Dunfern Mansion may be seen situated on a rising hill the beautiful Castle of Lord and Lady Dilworth, a prominent building commanding the finest view in the county. It had been remodelled by the present owner, after inheriting it from his late maternal uncle—Lord Leyburn; and, although equipped with all modern improvements and inventions necessary, yet there dwelt a lack of design and beauty about it possessed by Dunfern Mansion.

The bountiful owner of Dilworth Castle differed much in many respects from Sir John Dunfern. He was a nobleman of rare tact and capacities; a keen sportsman; a Turf frequenter; an ardent politician; and, in fact, a lover of everything which served to promote the interests of his extended and varied social circle in particular, and entire community in general.

Lady Dilworth, it may here be mentioned, was never of a very robust nature, and often had she felt the great strain of society press rather heavily on her weak frame, so much so, as to render the adoption of the subject of this book indispensable. Drawing his chair closer to the table, on which one of the great lamps stood, Sir John proceeded to peruse the contents of the note. It was an invitation from Lord and Lady Dilworth to attend a ball at Dilworth Castle on 22nd prox., given by them in honour of the marriage of Henry, fifth Marquis of Hill-Hall, with Ethel, Countess of Maidstone.

Lord Dilworth and the Marquis were personal friends of Sir John, and to accept this kind and courteous invitation would mean a step towards the summit of the matrimonial ladder, by meeting the majority of the fully-fledged belles in and around Canterbury, and especially Irene Iddesleigh, Lord Dilworth's adopted daughter, more generally known as "The Southern Beauty." He slept over the matter that night, with the result that next morning he wrote accepting the kind invitation, more through curiosity than desire.

Although he led a quiet and retired life, generally speaking, still he did not absent himself totally from a few social meetings occasionally, and if imagination painted his future in the manner so artfully designed by Lady Dilworth, no doubt this visit to Dilworth Castle might convert it into reality.

Arriving at the elegant castle, with its tower of modern fame, and spires of Gothic structure, Sir John was met in its great hall by the genial hostess, who conducted him to the brilliant reception-

room, superbly laid out for the comfort of its guests; and being the first to arrive, was thus afforded a good opportunity of inspecting the many valuable relics and works of art that adorned its huge and velvety walls.

On the centre wall right opposite where he sat hung a painted portrait, life-size, an admirable production of the well-known artist, "Peto," and not knowing where such an original of perfection and beauty could be found, he resolved to inquire, when opportunity offered, whose portrait it might be.

At this stage the numerous guests began to assemble, including the majority of the leading gentry in and around Canterbury, as it was looked upon as the chief social event of the season. Mothers were most fidgetty that their daughters should don their costliest gowns and brilliants, as rumour had it that the noble heir to Dunfern estate should honour the assembly with his august presence.

Report gained ground that Sir John, having quietly crept out of boyhood for a lengthened period, would end his days harnessed singly, but idle gossip, flying at all times kite-high, soon gave place in the wavering minds of society belles to that of more serious consideration and welcome expectancy.

On being introduced to all those outside his present circle of acquaintance on this evening, and viewing the dazzling glow of splendour which shone, through spectacles of wonder, in all its glory, Sir John felt his past life but a dismal dream, brightened here and there with a crystal speck of sunshine that had partly hidden its gladdening rays of bright futurity until compelled to glitter with the daring effect they soon should produce. But there awaited his view another beam of life's bright rays, who, on entering, last of all, commanded the minute attention of every one present—this was the beautiful Irene Iddesleigh.

How the look of jealousy, combined with sarcasm, substituted those of love and bashfulness! How the titter of tainted mockery rang throughout the entire apartment, and could hardly fail to catch the ear of her whose queenly appearance occasioned it! These looks and taunts serving to convince Sir John of Nature's fragile cloak which covers too often the image of indignation and false show, and seals within the breasts of honour and equality resolutions of an iron mould. On being introduced to Irene, Sir John concluded instantly, without instituting further inquiry, that this must be the original of the portrait so warmly admired by him. There she stood, an image of perfection and divine beauty, attired in a robe of richest snowy tint, relieved here and there by a few tiny sprigs of the most dainty maidenhair fern, without any ornaments whatever, save a diamond necklet of famous sparkling lustre and priceless value.

As the evening rolled into the small hours of the morning, the numerous guests began to repair to their respective homes, none of the weaker sex having had the slightest advancement in the direction of their coveted intentions, save Irene, who was fortunate in securing the attention of Sir John Dunfern during the happy hours that fled so quickly.

Immediately before taking his departure he pressed firmly her snowy hand, and left the pretty-gilded area which surrounded his first hopes of matrimony to enter what he was beginning to believe the weary apartments of Dunfern Mansion, that previously had held him bound to them in hermit-like fashion.

CHAPTER III

AROUSE the seeming deadly creature to that standard of joy and gladness which should mark his noble path! Endow him with the dewdrops of affection; cast from him the pangs of the dull past, and stamp them for ever beneath the waves of troubled waters; brighten his life as thou wouldst that of a faded flower; and when the hottest ray of that heavenly orb shall shoot its cheerful charge against the window panes of Dunfern Mansion, the worthy owner can receive it with true and profound thankfulness. Three weeks had scarcely passed ere Sir John was made the recipient of another invitation to Dilworth Castle. This second effusion of cordiality required neither anxious thought nor prolonged decision how to act, knowing as he did that it would again serve to bring his present thoughts into practice by affording him another opportunity of sharing in the loving looks of one for whom he feared there dwelt a strong inclination on his part to advance his affection.

Irene stood looking out on the lake beyond the richly draped window, ruminating on the days of her childhood, which lent a look of dullness to the beautiful face that beamed with delight as Sir John Dunfern entered. The evening was very pleasantly and quietly spent, Irene commanding the greater part of his time and attention, on account of Lady Dilworth being slightly ailing, whose health, generally speaking, at this period was not so robust as formerly, and consequently failed to warrant too many callers. As the clock struck eleven Sir John began to think of returning home, feeling quite happy, fancying his great affection was returned in full by Irene.

Being very domesticated, and having the stiff ideas of a bachelor of long standing so firmly imprinted in his nature, he felt very diffident in asking the object of his visit when next they should meet. But Lady Dilworth entering before taking his departure, saved him putting the shy question by placing herself in his position and demanding the required reply. Sir John promised without further ceremony to visit them more frequently in future, and left their midst with hasty step, lingering in the hall to cast another look at the lovely form which stood not far distant. Leisurely leaning back in his carriage, and burying himself in his great and costly cloak demanded by the night's icy aspect, he rolled along towards his home drowned in sweet thought of the beautiful girl whom he only recently knew, but whose regard for her raged with such rambling anxiety as to convince him of the propriety of making her aware how he meant to play the part of lover.

Until now he was inclined to be prejudiced against the snares and allurements of women, but he strongly resolved to try gradually and abandon every unkind thought harboured in his mind against them, fearing lest all his conjured imaginations were both unjust and selfish; and determined to drown them for ever in the clashing gulf of fate, felt a prouder and happier mortal than before.

But time would solve the problem and heal the wound which penetrated so deeply his bosom. Yea, a short time he hoped would bring his creeping fever of endearment under the binding stay of appointed authority, and heal its weakening effects with the sacred salve of truth.

Not until the horses dashed up the winding avenue with increased alacrity was he shaken from his meditating attitude, to be ushered once more into his home of boundless wealth. The lonely stare of grave bewilderment took the place of happiness that formerly seemed built in abundance for him within its walls, as he entered the palatial and gorgeously equipped abode he principally inhabited, feeling the tinge of the dull past filling him with entire despair, whilst meditating on the happy future which presented itself to him. How in a trivial period this lonely spot, he thought, should prove the beacon of never-dying bliss, when once furnished with the most precious treasure on earth—a virtuous woman! Ah! the very thought of his embosomed and anticipated alliance made him nervously happy; and believing a bright and noble future lay in store for the lonely owner of Dunfern Estate, he resolved to indulge nature in a few hours of calm repose.

The days moved along more quickly Sir John believed than formerly; and possibly he may have imagined this was so, as he felt no longer fettered with fear of fighting with his inward friend—

obstinacy, whose hand of drowsy bachelorism seemed for ever closed to his changing charity; he had at last thrown aside the garb of female dislike, and patronised that of a warm-hearted lover.

Irene did not lead Lady Dilworth to believe that she really cared for Sir John, and, when his name cropped up occasionally, she allowed herself always to keep the coast of conversation clear that would likely convict her views most, and managed cleverly thereby to deceive the friend who came not a day too soon to her rescue. Perhaps had Lady Dilworth proved less concerned about the orphan charge she freed from a life of toil, apparently, and instructed her more on the branches of integrity, then the lovely youthful Irene could have decided more honorably in all cases of questioning, and would have done justice, not alone to herself, but to all concerned; but, like many others similarly surrounded with lovers, battling in the war of extremes, and encompassed on all sides with apparent luxuries, she was confident she would some day come off victorious by acting the clever Corinthian.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN on the eve of glory, whilst brooding over the prospects of a bright and happy future, whilst meditating upon the risky right of justice, there we remain, wanderers on the cloudy surface of mental woe, disappointment and danger, inhabitants of the grim sphere of anticipated imagery, partakers of the poisonous dregs of concocted injustice. Yet such is life.

Sir John's visits began now to be numerous at Dilworth Castle, each visit serving further to strengthen the link of relationship, and bury, in the heaving breast of seeking solace, the dull delight of the weary past. As the weeks wore on, he reckoned them only as days, when comparing their loving length with those of the bleak years he tried to enjoy alone, before taking such steps—yes, serious steps—as those fancied by the would-be bachelor.

At first he was careless and indifferent to the flowery harangues of mothers who paid him periodical visits, with their daughters, of apology, and firmly retained the obstinate qualities of an autocratic ruler, until softened in the presence of one he found he was learning to steadily love. He believed now that the chief stripes, viz.—observation, inclination, advancement and accomplishment, in the well-spun web of matrimony, must harmonise with the groundwork of happiness, without which our lives are not worth an unstamped coin.

Love's path, on which Sir John was known now to tread with the step of intensity, seemed smooth as the ice of Inglewood. There were no obstacles in his way of which he was yet aware, save imagination; this, also, was chased from his mind by the evident and ample return of Irene's polished affection, the foul gloss of which he failed to notice, and whose pretensions were so cleverly carried out as to defy detection.

Irene was an accomplished and clever girl, and well able to sustain her hidden regard throughout for one who for years previous had been endeavouring to remove the great barrier of position which blocked his path of approach towards her affection. As yet her parentage was totally unknown to Sir John; still, he felt it must not have belonged to the rude and ridiculous, since she possessed all the qualities, outwardly, and features, of a highly refined race. And when only a girl of eleven summers, when the worthy hand of benevolence, friendship, and love clutched the tiny fingers of absolute want, there visibly seemed nothing lacking in appearance, manner, or education to solicit the pity or suspicion of her charitable guardian and protector.

Sir John Dunfern's many visits of late to Dilworth Castle had been creating quite a sensation throughout the quiet corners of costly curiosity, until an announcement appeared in *Mack's Society Journal* to the following effect:—

“A marriage is arranged to take place in August between Sir John Dunfern, of Dunfern Mansion, County Kent, and Irene Iddesleigh, adopted daughter of Lord and Lady Dilworth, of Dilworth Castle, in same county.”

This notice, no doubt, caused the partakers in drawing-room *tetè-a-tetès* to share in the pangs of jealousy, with silent resentment. Perplexity, a little, would find refuge within the homes of many who led Society by the string of superficial show and pompous importance; and during the interval that elapsed between such an announcement and its important celebration, many and infamous were the charges poured forth against Irene Iddesleigh.

The month preceding Irene's wedding was one of merriment at Dilworth Castle, Lord and Lady Dilworth extending the social hand of fashionable folly on four different occasions. They seemed drunk with delight that Irene, whom they looked upon as their own daughter, should carry off the palm of purity, whilst affluence, position, and title were for years waiting with restless pride to triumph at its grasp.

It was at the second of these social gatherings that the first seed of jealousy was sown within the breast of Sir John Dunfern, and which had a tendency to remain until it gradually grew to such a rapid state of maturity as to be rooted, if possible, for ever from its dusty bed of ambush.

Yes, when the merriment was at its height, and the heat too oppressive to allow much comfort to the corpulent, the espoused of Irene dropped unexpectedly out of the midst of the aristocratic throng, and being passionately an ardent admirer of the fairy-like fruits of the efforts of the horticulturist, directed his footsteps towards the well-filled conservatory at the south wing of the building.

The different-shaded lights which dangled from its roof bestowed a look of Indian exquisiteness on the many quaint and delicate productions of nature that rested daintily in their beds of terra-cotta tint.

But before leaving the room he vaguely scanned the throng to catch a glimpse of Irene, and failed to notice her amongst the many who danced so gaily to the well-timed tunes of the celebrated pianist, Charles Wohden, whose musical touch was always capable of melting the most hardened sinner into moods of mellow softness, or cheering the most downcast and raising their drooping look of sadness to that of high-strung hilarity.

Sir John wandered in and out through the numerous windings of sweetest fragrance, until arriving at the farthest corner, of rather darkened shade, and on a wire couch beheld the object of his pursuit, in closest conversation with her tutor, whose name he had altogether failed to remember, only having had the pleasure of his acquaintance a few hours before.

“Can it be possible?” exclaimed Sir John, in profound astonishment. “Why, I have been searching for you for some time past, and have accidentally found you at last!” Irene, rising to her feet in a second, was utterly dazed, and had the dim lights shewed her proud face to advantage, the ruddy glow of deepest crimson guilt would have manifested itself to a much greater degree. Making multitudinous apologies, etc., she at once joined Sir John, who led her back, in apparent triumph, to share the next waltz.

How the true heart beat with growing passion during the remainder of the merry festivity, and as the final announcement of separation was whispered from ear to ear, the gradual wane of Love’s lofty right would fain have dwindled into pompous nothing as the thought kept tickling his warm enthusiasm with the nimble fingers of jealousy. That she whom he had ardently hoped should share his future with sheer and loving caresses of constant companionship and wife-like wisdom should be trapped in probably vowing to another her great devotion for him!

But better allow the sickening thought to die on the eve of insult rather than live in the breast of him who, at no distant date, would hear the merry peals of wedding bells ring with gladness, and naturally rejoice at the object of their origin.

CHAPTER V

OUR hopes when elevated to that standard of ambition which demands unison may fall asunder like an ancient ruin. They are no longer fit for construction unless on an approved principle. They smoulder away like the ashes of burnt embers, and are cast outwardly from their confined abode, never more to be found where once they existed only as smouldering serpents of scorned pride.

The little chat that Irene apparently enjoyed in the conservatory would gladly have become an act of forgetfulness on her part had not Sir John reminded her of its existence a few days afterwards. The spark of jealous passion had not fully died out after the incident referred to, and awaiting silently its decease, Sir John almost had grown a mourner to its imagined demise, following its undying remains so far as the village of Opportunity, when it was again to revive and shine as luminously as before.

It happened about three weeks preceding the day set apart for their holy union, on Sir John arriving at the castle, he was informed of Irene's recent exit, and gently turning away, he resolved to have a stroll in the tastefully laid-out gardens with the sole object of meeting her.

Walking leisurely along, and stooping to pick up some fallen fruit, he suddenly heard a faint sound issue amongst the trees. Remaining breathless for a few seconds, lest he might be deceived by the rippling sounds of the adjacent waves, he again heard the same sweet strain, but of much longer duration than before, and quietly moving towards the spot whence it issued, another sound met his ear in the distance, which seemed to be the hasty tread of some one making good an escape, before he got time to view the object he would eagerly have pursued, but checking his desire somewhat, he allowed the matter to sink into silence. Boldly moving towards the spot whence the sound of music issued, how delightfully surprised was he to find a magnificently-constructed little summer-house, a charming pyramidal Gothic structure, robed internally with mossy mantles of nature, and brightened beyond conception with the instrument of humanity which gave origin to such pathetic and sweetened strains.

Politely offering an apology for intruding on the private little palace of Irene, who failed completely to hide her gross confusion from the keen gaze of her espoused, who never seemed to notice in the least the sudden change that swept so swiftly over her pallid cheeks at his unexpected visit, Sir John sat down.

Irene held in her snowy palms a roll of Italian music, which she earnestly endeavoured to conceal from his penetrating stare, probably on account of the words contained therein, which for ever would be unknown to his varied sphere of knowledge, and which would undoubtedly have betrayed her feelings, never dreaming that they should strike other ears than those for whom they practically were intended.

Perceiving her great excitement at the unexpected appearance of him, who ever afterwards kept his jealous thoughts in silent motion, he absolutely evaded making any inquiry whatever, or slightest allusion to the name and nature of the parchment she so firmly retained. Sir John chatted gaily until he gained good ground for delivering to her the message that instinct had so prompted him to utter.

"Irene, my beloved one," he began; "it is now only about a score of days until I hoped for ever to call you mine; a hope which unmercifully has haunted me since I fortunately gazed on your lovely face; a hope which I trusted should be fully appreciated by both you and me, and which, I now must own, can never be realised until the clearance of the barrier that since our engagement has been but too apparent.

"The sole object of my visit, my dear Irene"—here Sir John clasped her tender hand in his—"tonight is to elicit from you a matter that lately has cast a shadowy gloom over my anticipated bright and cheerful future. I am not one of those mortals who takes offence at trifles, neither am I a man of hasty temper or words—quite the contrary, I assure you; but it has, fortunately or unfortunately,

been probably a failing amongst my ancestors to court sensitiveness in its minutest detail, and, I must acknowledge, I stray not from any of them in this particular point.

“I must acquaint you, though it pains me deeply to do so, that lately you have not treated me with such respect or attention as you certainly lavished upon me before the announcement of our engagement, and for what reason or reasons I now wish to be apprised. You seem when in company with others to ignore my remarks to you entirely, and treat them with proud disdain, as if shame took the place of pride at my wordy approach! I felt and do feel quite hurt, and am resolved that no such repetition shall take place in future. I promised to be at the castle last night, but unfortunately I felt indisposed, and only that I wished to have a thorough understanding relative to your recent conduct, and which has pained me acutely, I should not have ventured out of doors this evening either. I was, in consequence, obliged to write you last night, asking a written reply, which you failed to give! And this evening, instead of being doubly rejoiced at my presence, you, on the contrary, seem doubly annoyed! I therefore pray, my dearest Irene, that you will, and I am persuaded honestly, not hesitate to satisfy me regarding this unpleasantness, that should anything of which you are now aware cause your conduct to be changed towards me, do not allow it a lair within your breast, but confide in me as thou wouldst in a dearly-trusted and faithful lover.”

At this stage Irene began to consider seriously the earnestness that accompanied the words of Sir John, knowing well she had been guilty, grossly guilty, of the charges with which he impeached her, and which were mixed with child-like simplicity, descriptive only of a world-famed bachelor. She pondered whether or not honesty should take the place of deceit—too often practised in women—and concluded to adopt the latter weapon of defence. Raising her hazel eyes to his, and clearing the weft of truth that had been mixing with the warp of falsehood to form an answer of plausible texture, fringed with different shades of love, she thus began:

“My dearest and much beloved, I assure you your remarks have astounded me not a little! Your words sting like a wasp, though, I am quite convinced, unintentionally. You are well aware that within a short period I will be marked out publicly as mistress of Dunfern mansion—an honour revered in every respect by me; an honour to which I at one time dare never aspire; an honour coveted by many much more worthy than I, whose parentage is as yet bathed in the ocean of oblivious ostentation, until some future day, when I trust it shall stand out boldly upon the brink of disclosure to dry its saturated form and watery wear with the heat of equality. You are about to place me in a position which cannot fail to wring from jealousy and covetousness their flaming torch of abuse. Yes, Sir John, on me you have not ceased to lavish every available treasure and token of your unbounded love. You have been to me not only a loyal admirer, but a thoroughly upright and estimable example of life’s purest treasures. You have resolved to place me by your side as your equal, whilst wealth in boundless store is thirsting for your touch. You have elevated my unknown position to such a pitch as to defy taunt or jeer, and at any time if I may have, seemingly, ignored your advances, it was purely want of thought, and not through any underhand motive or scheme whatever.

“I assure you your allusion to my verbal answer last night is very pronounced, and may be overlooked on the ground of pure disappointment. Our time of singleness is now short, and begging your forgiveness for my seeming neglect or indifference, I hope the tide, which until now has flown so gently, may not be stayed on the eve of entering the harbour of harmony, peace, and love.”

At the commencement of Irene’s answer of lavishing praises and flimsy apologies, her affianced moved to the opposite corner of the rustic building to scan the features of her he wholly worshipped and reluctantly doubted. Every sentence the able and beautiful girl uttered caused Sir John to shift his apparently uncomfortable person nearer and nearer, watching at the same time minutely the divine picture of innocence, until at last, when her reply was ended, he found himself, altogether unconsciously, clasping her to his bosom, whilst the ruby rims which so recently proclaimed accusations and innocence met with unearthly sweetness, chasing every fault over the hills of doubt, until hidden in the hollow of immediate hate.

CHAPTER VI

THE silvery touch of fortune is too often gilt with betrayal: the meddling mouth of extravagance swallows every desire, and eats the heart of honesty with pickled pride: the **impostury** of position is petty, and ends, as it should commence, with stirring strife. But conversion of feminine opinions tries the touchy temper of opposition, and too seldom terminates victoriously.

“Great mercy! Only another week and I shall almost cease to be a free thinker! Just seven days more and what!—I shall openly have to confess to the world an untruth! Would there be any means of flight from the dangerous dragon that haunts me night and day? Could anything possible be done to save myself from false alliance? Too late!—too late!

“Only seven days and this beautiful boudoir shall own me no more, with its walls of purest white and gilded borders!

“Just seven days and I shall be fettered with chains of dragging dislike and disappointment! Only seven days and thus shall end my cherished hopes, my girlish pride, my most ardent wish, but, alas! not my love! Seven days more shall see my own darling Os”— Suddenly Irene was aroused by the ringing of the breakfast bell, before she got time to finish the sentence that troubled her weary brain for months before. Dressing herself with frantic expertness, she dashed down the winding staircase with an alacrity better imagined than described, and rushing into the breakfast room where Lord and Lady Dilworth eagerly awaited her, presented the outward mocking appearance of being the happiest of mortals. Her beloved benefactors, who had been the prime movers in the matter of matrimony, saw plainly a saddened look about the lovely face, which Irene tried hard to suppress, and asking why it appeared at this gay time, was answered evasively. Indeed, Lord and Lady Dilworth were wholly ignorant of the present state of affairs, nor did Irene reveal at any time to Lady Dilworth her great hatred for Sir John, or her maddened desire to become the wife of a poor tutor.

Had she only taken into her confidence her whose wise counsel and motherly example were at all times a prompt step to decision; or had she only hinted to Lady Dilworth her manifest inability to return Sir John’s great affection, matters would probably have reached another climax. But owing to the present precarious position in which Lord and Lady Dilworth stood, and as yet unknown to both Irene and other most intimate acquaintances, great was Lady Dilworth’s desire to see Irene permanently settled, knowing as she did that ere the sun of another August day would flash its shimmering rays against the crystal stays of Dilworth Castle she would be beyond easy access to Irene either in time of rejoicing or sorrowing.

Preparations were at last almost completed for such an auspicious event. Invitations were issued numerous for the reception to be held at Dilworth Castle after Irene’s marriage, but sparingly during the ceremony; all of which were mostly accepted. Costly, multiplying, and varied were the gifts received by Irene; enough to make a princess stare with startling bewilderment.

Amongst the many, none came from Irene’s tutor, Oscar Otwell! And although he was the first to whom Lady Dilworth addressed an invitation, still there was no reply, much to the annoyance and astonishment of hostess on the one hand and knowledge of Irene on the other; as, verily, it was not unknown to Irene that absolute indifference to facts, seemingly of domestic importance, was a positive point in Oscar, and never better exemplified than in the present existing state of affairs, which, sickly as it proved to Irene, was deadly so to Oscar.

But future facts had to be solved, which undoubtedly would be treated with more comparative reverence than heretofore, by him who suffered severely—yea, acutely—from the blow struck him on the eve of aspiration and achievement. Love, alas! when smitten with the sword of indifference, dieth soon, but once struck on the tunnelled cheek of secrecy with the hand of pity there leaves a scar of indelible intolerance, until wiped out for ever with the curative balsam of battled freedom.

Sir John and Irene met in Dilworth Castle for the last time on the morning of the third day of August, being the day set apart for the celebration of their marriage. It commenced with the ringing of the village bells; the sun shone forth in all his universal glory; emblems of the approaching festivity did not fail to appear on the housetops of the humblest village peasant; gladness reigned throughout the household, and all hearts, save two, rejoiced with unabated activity.

It was a morning never to be forgotten by Lord and Lady Dilworth, who, on that day, would be robbed of the treasure held firm and fast by them for the lengthened period of nine years, and which they yielded up with hearts of sorrow, not because of the change in which Irene should have taken deep interest, but on account of the burthen of trouble which loaded them with leaden weights of which they could not possibly free themselves. The intense excitement that for weeks before had found such refuge within their cherished and much-loved home had not long now to live: it would die on the doorstep of apparent bereavement never more to appear within Dilworth Castle under similar circumstances. They knew well that the gnawing jaws of poverty, which for years had failed to expose their grinding power, had reached the last and only bite of sudden termination, and thereby stamped their marks of melancholy so impressively upon the noble brows of the worthy owners of Dilworth Castle, that time could never blot them from observation. As before stated few were those invited to be present at the wedding ceremony, which was to take place about twelve o'clock noon.

Sir John arrived at the Castle shortly before that time, looking charming indeed, whilst Irene, though departing from the rules laid down by Lady Dilworth, demanded from all present remarks bordering on similarity. She looked nervously pale, but queenly, and mastered thoroughly the exposure of the painful agony through which she was passing, knowing as she did and fully believed that "all is not gold that glitters."

It may interest some to know that Irene silently and secretly resolved not to array herself in white; she was reconciled that neither the marriage robe of purity nor the too beaming wedding face was to appear before such devout and reverential Church dignitaries as the Bishop of Barelegs and Canon Foot, with highly impressed and open falsehood, as that practised by her in the absence of labouring under such a solemn vow.

What must have been the breathless surprise of Lady Dilworth chiefly, and those present also, who, only the evening previous, had been pouring such praises over the magnificent duchesse satin gown, which eligible Parisian dressmakers pronounced their chief production of the season, when Irene appeared arrayed in an Irish poplin of the darkest visible shade of green, without either train or flower of distinction, not even a speck of ribbon or border of lace, and no ornament only the valued necklet which graced her pearly throat when first Sir John was tempted with her **enhancing** beauty to bestow upon her his choice collection of love's purest fragrance, which should cast the sweetest scent of mutual relationship throughout the dazzling apartments of the mansion she was about to grace.

So thunderstruck and grievously horrified did Lady Dilworth seem at the vague departure of Irene from her orders, that she dare not trust herself to offer her the first motherly embrace! Irene, perceiving the great embarrassment of her beloved Lady Dilworth, glided across the room, and sitting down to the right of her upon whom she had that day flung, in the face of devotion, the last dregs of defiance, "begged to offer an apology for such unruly conduct," and added "that all would be revealed at a future date when least expected."

In the very room where Sir John was first puzzled concerning the beautiful portrait, was he now made the recipient of the original. After the important ceremony was performed, and the register signed, Sir John and Lady Dunfern, when the usual congratulations were ended, left by the one o'clock train *en route* for the Continent. Thus were joined two hearts of widely different beat—one of intense love, which hearsay never could shake; the other of dire dislike, which reason could never alter.

"Born under a lucky star," was the whispered echo throughout the distinguished guests who sat down to breakfast after the junction of opposites. Yea, this was a remark of truth visibly, and might have kept good during the remainder of their lives had not the tuitional click of bygone attachment

kept moving with measured pace, until stopped after months, or it may be, small years of constant swinging.

Did Lady Dunfern ever dream that her apology for disobedience to Lady Dilworth's orders, in not arraying herself in the garb of glistening glory, could ever be accepted, even by the kind and loving Lady Dilworth?

Did she imagine for a moment that she, to whom she owed anything but disobedience, even in its simplest form, should be wrested from her arms of companionship ere her return to Dunfern Mansion? Did the thought ever flash through her mind that never again would she be able to pour into the ear of her trusted helper the secrets of the heart of deception, which, for the past seven months, had raged so furiously within her?

Better leave her to the freedom of a will that ere long would sink the ship of opulence in the sea of penury, and wring from her the words:—"Leave me now, deceptive demon of deluded mockery; lurk no more around the vale of vanity, like a vindictive viper; strike the lyre of living deception to the strains of dull deadness, despair and doubt; and bury on the brink of benevolence every false vow, every unkind thought, every trifle of selfishness and scathing dislike, occasioned by treachery in its mildest form!"

CHAPTER VII

DISTANT shores have great attractions and large expectations. They harbour around their beaches the exile and patriot, the king and peasant, the lawyer and artisan, the rising swindler and ruined prince. Spotted throughout the unclaimed area of bared soil may be seen the roughly-constructed huts and lofty homes of honest industry. Yes, and concealed therein are hearts yearning for the land of nativity and national freedom; hearts which sorrow after bygone days, and sink low when brooding over the future tide of fortune which already has stopped its gentle flow.

The reception on the evening of Irene's marriage was glorious and brilliant, as were all those given by Lord and Lady Dilworth, and, although attended by society's cream alone, there appeared a visible and unhidden vacancy in the absence of her who so often lent a glow of gaiety to the high-toned throng.

There seemed to be no rival now of buried lineage to mar their desire, or incur the jealousy of would-be opponents; no one to share sympathetically with the afflicted sister of equality and worth; nor was there any one present of such knightly and commanding dignity as he, who, not many hours previous, had taken upon him the sad duty of delivering up the keys of devotion to her who kept the door of ardent adoration locked against his approach.

It would probably be a long time ere such a scene of silly jealousy and ire would take place as that witnessed, in which the greater majority of those present were then partakers! And, further, it would surely be a much longer period before these guests would again share alike in the generosity so often extended them by Lord and Lady Dilworth.

Next day after Irene's marriage was a busy one at Dilworth Castle; hasty and numerous were the preparations for desolation and departure. Weeks preceding the joyful event, or what should have been, were leisurely devoted to the artistic arrangements in every room within the lordly manor. But, alas! so sudden now was joy's termination, that hours alone were the boundary of command.

It may be stated that Lord Dilworth owned three very extensive estates, namely—Dilworth, Ayrtown, and Howden. The first-mentioned extended around the castle of that name, encompassing a spacious tract of soil indeed, and might have done justice to moderation in its most expensive form. The Ayrtown Estate, which entirely covers the southern portion of Cheshire, owns a magnificent Hall, the residence of the Earl of Tukesham, and, although not considered so lucrative as Dilworth, may be estimated a handsome dowry for the son of any rising nobleman in the realm. The Howden Estate, on which are elegantly formed two buildings of note—namely, Blandford Castle and Lauderdale Lodge, both exquisite constructions of architecture and skilled workmanship, and occupied respectively by Sir Sydney Hector and Admiral Charles Depew—lies chiefly around the south-west of Yorkshire, and is not quite so desirable or adapted for agriculture as the two first mentioned, being mostly rented for grazing purposes by the numerous and varied owners of its rugged plots. These estates became so heavily mortgaged that prompt sale was indispensable, and, the matter being quietly arranged six months beforehand, the sixth day of August was the day set apart for the disposal of same.

Bidders were numerous and offers low. Eventually the purchasers were as follow:—The Marquis of Orland bought Dilworth Estate; Lord Henry Headen purchased Ayrtown Estate, whilst the lot of Howden fell upon Sir Rowland Joyce, the famous historian and national bard.

Thus were wrested from Lord and Lady Dilworth their luxurious living. They were driven from their nursery of rich and complicated comforts, their castle of indolence and ease. They were now thrown upon the shivering waters of want, without a word of sympathy in the dreadful hour of their great affliction, without home or friend to extend shelter or sustenance, and cast afloat upon the ocean of oscillating chance to speed across it as best they could.

Was Lord Dilworth therefore to be pitied? Were the torrents of gold which were bound to trickle from these enormous lands and dwellings, manufactories and villages, too trifling for his use?

Not a morsel of pity was offered either him or Lady Dilworth as their circumstances became known in the homes of their associates, who so often fed on the fat of their folly and graced their well-lined tables always covered with dainties of deserving censure.

Could human mind contemplate that she who reigned supreme amongst society, she who gave the ball in honor of Irene Iddesleigh's marriage, should ere four days be a penniless pauper? Yet such was fact, not fiction.

The seventh day of August saw Lord and Lady Dilworth titled beggars, steering their course along the blue and slippery waves of the Atlantic, to be participators in the loathing poverty which always exists in homes sought after destruction, degradation, and reckless extravagance.

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