

CRUEL

THE GRAVE;

The Secret of Dunraven Castle.

BY ANNIE ASHMORE,

Author of "Faithful Margaret," Etc., Etc.

CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

She rose, deeply agitated, quite unconscious of the beseeching expression of her proud eyes, and only feeling that she might betray her thrilling hope and fear unless she changed her position.

Still holding her hand, he rose with her, and spoke on with imperious urgency. "Speak; do you grant my request, or must I take my own?"

A stifled sob came from her very heart; she could not comprehend him. "What—the name?" she stammered. "What is it?"

"What! you do not guess?" cried he, with fierce incredulity—then a glance of satanic mirth crossed his pale, anxious face. She tore her hand from him in a wild revulsion of shame and wrath.

"How should I guess the new object of your vagrant fancy?" demanded she, disdainfully.

"No, no; this is no fancy," exclaimed Acerrington, forgetting every lesser emotion in his fervor, "this is the best love of my life; I grew nobler merely by musing on her; she is my peace, my happiness; without her I can never be complete—my golden-tressed Aurora!"

"Her name?" breathed Mrs. Dellamere with bloodless lips and dilated eyes, like one fascinated by a rarer.

"Oh, true, you claim a formal announcement," said Acerrington, recovering himself. "I love your daughter Loveday, dear madam, and I have her for my wife."

The tide of Mrs. Dellamere's feelings reached its highest point of horror.

"My daughter your wife!" she exclaimed bitterly, with a recoiling posture. "I shall never consent! Such a union would be abhorrent to every natural instinct!"

"You refuse!" said Acerrington with flashing eyes. "Is the past, which I have outlived, so sweet to you that it renders such a union unnatural?"

But he could not go farther into consent thus; it was her child's happiness she was defending—she could suffer humiliating taunts for her sake.

"It is impossible on that and every ground," said she, her voice shaken with passionate repugnance. "You are a treacherous man; there have been falsehoods in your life that even I have seen. You cannot have my daughter. Also, her heart is engaged."

She shook off his grasping hand from her cashmere, and hastened away.

But not far; before she had taken a half dozen steps he was by her, looking into her face with a laughing devil in each of his eyes.

"There can be but one explanation of this resistance," said he. "You love me yet!"

She stood looking up at him, her eyes flashing with fierce scorn; her hands locked together to crush down the wild forces within her which threatened to leap out in some vengeful act.

"You are a craven!" she said, with something grating in her sweet tones. "If my heart could still cling to a man like you I should tear it from my breast. You are false, I shrink from you, I despise you; is that love?"

She waited a moment, with glowing eyes fastened upon him, for any reply he might venture to make, but as he made none, only gnawed his lip in speechless humiliation, she turned quickly, and passed from his view with her own silent, sweeping grace.

He returned to the fountain and threw himself once more upon the stone seat with a muttered malediction.

He had not believed she could defy him; he had not prepared himself for the open exhibition of her scorn.

Conscious of his powers of management, he had thought to manipulate Mrs. Dellamere through her wounded pride until she would give him her consent to win Loveday to save herself from the suspicion of loving him yet.

She had laughed him to scorn, and he was vulnerable to the shame of being scorned. He began to fear and hate her.

Many thoughts passed through his busy brain. He recalled his various loves, and how sincere each had been in its time. How much this proud, imperial beauty, Laura, had been to him in her day! how sweet and warm had been that early love! and how he had suffered when she cast him aside for a richer mate!

Ah! she deserved to suffer in her turn; he should not spare her.

Then a wild memory of Enzeondo Incheape flew like a red-hot bolt through his soul, her majestic purity, her unsullied fidelity, and her bitter fate.

He clenched his hand and drove the blighting thought away with a heart-felt imprecation.

Then stole the image of Loveday Dellamere upon him, tender, softly; no shadow of mortification or remorse blurred that memory; he mused upon her dawn-like youth and innocence, her sunny beauty, which radiated pure joy, and he craved for her with passionate intensity as the wret had craved for happiness.

Then he reviewed the resistance just offered to his desire, and laughed sardonically.

He would brush aside this opposing will as if it were a cobweb across his path, let who might suffer

CHAPTER VIII.

"ALAS! I HAVE A RIVAL!"

Was it true that the dashing Scotch belle, Merrion Rae, had fallen in love with young Auberon Cree? The ancient sibly Crisbrooke said so, but then she said many oddish things, and saw twice as far through a millstone as other people.

When Acerrington returns to the more immediate scene of gaiety, he finds a dance on the grass in progression, the music hidden behind a tall leafy screen, and gawdy banks bounding the ball-room. There was Merrion Rae tripping through an intricate figure with Auberon Cree, her passionate, darkling glance and heightened beauty betraying the triumph of the moment to her! and here was Loveday, gazing in and out among the dancers unattended, her wild and brilliant graces fresh as ever, as if to prove her care-free independence of Auberon's smiles.

Toward her Acerrington wends his way with melancholy sweetness, and, catching her eye, without a word woos her to him by the sheer force of his dominant gaze. To see her struggle against him, whirl past with defiant glance, circle round the grassy mead, and flit back, a little nearer each revolution, lured by his eyes—those deep, dark, mournful eyes that seem to brood over grief and wrong, and to plead for sympathy—till at last she is close to him, laughing out a silvery echo of the waltz! She sweeps him the "presentation courtesy," and comes up to re-aver with fairy feet pointed, and a look of petulant waywardness, crying:

"Here I am, Colonel; now speak quickly, for my turn comes next to dance."

"I did not summon you, Sprite," said Acerrington, very softly, and looking deep into her upraised eyes, without a smile.

"But—yes, you did! You—"

"Looked at you, that was all!" murmured the gentle tones in her ear; "but perhaps I mesmerized you a little."

Perhaps he did!

She tried to look at him independently, but could not endure, without emotion, the earnest beseeching of his gaze.

"I thought mamma had sent for me—I saw you talking with her," said Loveday, turning away, but slowly.

"You will give me one waltz?" asked he, staying her in spite of herself.

She hesitated, glancing involuntarily at Auberon with a trace of anxiety, which Acerrington instantly divined as the wish to avoid doing anything which might not be to Auberon's taste.

"It is but a little thing for a careworn man like me to ask from your buoyant youth, that you should give me back five minutes of my by-gone days of happiness!" said he wistfully. "Shall you dislike it so much?"

"No, no, no, no," faltered she, abashed; "I shall waltz with you for my next partner." And with that he let her go.

In a few minutes Merrion Rae was disengaged, and Acerrington seized the opportunity.

"Her grace sent me to amuse you, Queen of Scots," he said, airily, leading her for a promenade.

"I am quiescent," returned the lady, absently; "do your best."

"Fair queen, I beseech your aid!"

"Tis yours, Sir Colonel. Speak!"

"I love a lady."

"Eh bien! So do most men."

"Alas, I have a rival."

"Impossible. Who could rival Colonel Acerrington?"

"Sweet demoiselle, you are pleased to laugh at me; yet I am in trouble."

"Did you not offer to amuse me?"

"True. Well, you may laugh, yet help me, and I will be content."

"I help you! Is it possible?"

"Are you not as wise as you are witty—as good as you are pretty? You certainly can, if you will, do much to extricate me from a dilemma."

"Ah, now I am dying to aid you, your flattery is so sweet. Only show me how I can be of use to you."

"Suppose a cavalier, much like that dark-browed fellow Acerrington, loved a sunny-tressed Aurora like—"

"Miss Dellamere, for instance," interposed Merrion, laughing mischievously, as he stopped and looked at her. "Oh, I have not been blind, dear Colonel, and I wish you every success."

"Thank you, Lady Merrion; now I shall tell you the obstacle. Suppose this lady was half promsed, by the parents, to a young man who loves her"—(Merrion started and changed color)—"but only with a fraternal love," proceeded Acerrington, who had not lost this sign of emotion. "for his whole heart is given to another, and that other—"

"Ha! ha! ha! quite a 'Comedy of Errors,'" laughed Merrion, defiantly meeting his significant glance, though her brilliant face glowed with rich blushes. "And now, what part can I play in all this? Or have you yet to come to that point?"

"And that other," resumed Acerrington, boldly, "has only to accept Lis attentions for a few days, during which she may be endeavoring to teach her own heart to respond to his. Thus the first-named lady will feel herself free to love me, and all will end well."

"But by what caprice do you confide in this to me?" demanded the high-spirited girl, who would rather have perished than permit any one to guess the state of her heart toward Auberon.

"Ah, well—perhaps only to amuse you! Let us talk of something else," said the Colonel carelessly. And quite convinced that she understood all that was necessary, he soon led her back to her friends.

They danced together, Richard Acerrington and Loveday Dellamere.

He slid his nervous arm about her waist, his left hand clasped her finger tips delicately, firmly. They floated round among the others, light as shadows flickering, and upborne by the wild measure of a waltz-whirlwind. His warm breath on her brow, his dark eyes softly shining down upon her, his gentle strength supporting hers as if one will governed their motions. A singular sensation gradually took possession of Loveday, as if she was being borne out of herself, a feeling as dreamy and delicious as inexplicable. Perceiving by the relaxing of her self-poise his growing power over her, Acerrington softly tightened his clasp of her waist,

stole a firmer hold of her hand, and, timing his movement to the long-drawn, longing notes of the next musical bars, he bent lower over her, and allowed his dark eyes, charged with unutterably beseeching tenderness, to feed upon hers. All his soul streamed forth in that enraptured gaze. It could not startle or repel her, it was so very humble and imploring, and there was the music, passionately wooing her for him, telling of his sorrowful past, of his solitary strangerhood in his own native land—wooing, wooing her to believe in him and forget her first repulsion.

And Auberon had only loved her as a sister, while she—oh, shame! to yield one thought to him who had no love for her!

Loveday's maiden pride was waking with her knowledge that Acerrington sought her out from among all these other fascinating ladies; she had looked forward with blind trust to Auberon's return, when he would tell her that he loved her, and calm her heart in reward.

He had not spoken of love; he had been just as tenderly fraternal as of old, and no more; and she had borne the sharp surprise proudly, led her smart and waited the future patiently; but lately she had become aware of Merrion Rae's strange heightened beauty and fascination when in Auberon's presence, and with love's jealous quickness, had guessed her secret.

And to-day, closely watching, she had seen Auberon's interest seemingly quite absorbed in her; he and she had been together so much and had been so brilliantly responsive to each other's sallies—ah, foolish little Loveday, why should she hope any longer? It was a relief to turn to Col. Acerrington, and hide her heavy heart by seeming engrossed with him.

And if Auberon did not like it—well, it was far better to vex him a little than to show such slavish obedience to his slightest wish that he must perforce discover her miserable and hopeless love for him.

On then in the whirling waltz, to the thrilling music, which spoke to each bounding heart in its own language; and now Acerrington begins a soft murmuring in her ear, delicately impersonal yet perfectly interesting, to which she listens with innocent admiration. Well he knows how to please; the guileless young creature knows so little of evil that she is easily pleased; she has no bias to suspicion in her sunny nature, and she is grateful to Colonel Acerrington for exerting himself to entertain her.

That he loves her does not dawn on Loveday yet; this ignorance leaves her more freedom to observe and enjoy his manifold graces.

He has quite overcome her instinctive mistrust of him before that wonderful waltz is finished; while he—ah! what would he not give to fold her to his adoring heart and call her his own!

As he leads her from the lawn, a couple are slowly pacing before them, apparently too engrossed with each other to observe their approach.

Loveday's pensive humor flies as she recognizes Auberon and Merrion Rae, and she utters some sparkling nonsense, and laughs aloud with frolic archness; and as Auberon looks back she flings him a merry glance which tells him nothing but that she is well pleased.

His face changes; he seems to turn cold from head to foot; all the dreamy pleasure with which he has been listening to the clever waltches of his companion, fades away. He looks haughty and severe as on a clear-cut beautiful young face can look.

But Merrion Rae glows and blushes under Acerrington's meaning glances with a helpless self-consciousness which convinces Loveday that there has been some very sweet love-making going on before she and Acerrington came in sight.

A wild desire possessed her to prove to all concerned how little this affects her, and she runs up to Merrion, draws down her head to her own level, and whispers archly,

"There's nothing half so sweet in life as Love's Young Dream!"

"What does she say?" asks Auberon, attempting to catch her hand, while Merrion shakes her finger threateningly at her, crying, "Hu! hu!" and blushed furiously; and Loveday dances off, humming the music of the words she had just quoted.

Auberon makes no further effort to detain her; and Acerrington carries her off in triumph.

"These two understand each other," says he gravely, when they are out of earshot; "we shall have the Scotch beauty for a resident in Salford ere long, I can see that."

"Oh, yes, it is very evident!" says Loveday, airily.

Acerrington conveys Miss Dellamere to her mother, stays long enough beside her to impress her with the conviction that he despairs of winning Loveday, and is much depressed in consequence, and then discreetly takes his leave.

That night Mrs. Dellamere lingers over her lovely child after she has kissed her and bade her go to sleep.

She wants to warn her against Colonel Acerrington; and she cannot get the words out. That cowardly taunt of his rankles in her mind like a poison—what if Loveday should also suspect that her mother's opposition meant that she owed him herself? What if he had prepared the child's mind for this doubt by confiding to her that her mother and himself were old-time lovers?

She could not be in much danger, surely; does she not love Auberon?

Mrs. Dellamere cannot get one word out the memory of her interview with Acerrington is like a blister; to recall it, stinging pain.

She only kisses Loveday again, and leaves her to sleep.

And Love lies all night in the dark with sweet eyes wide and burning, enduring the first sorrow of her life as she may.

CHAPTER IX.

MY LADY'S STORY.

I have borne my sorrow patiently these many years, but time has not brought deliverance. Still we are Sundered, my lord and I. He lives a brooding hermit in his English castle; I pine here in this Northern isle, hidden from the world—and he has not looked upon my face since that bitter day when he drove me

out of his life, because two villains fled away my honor.

The wild winds moan around my lonely tower—the breakers roar at its feet. I mourn and pray throughout the long, resounding nights, a fever burning forever in my veins.

Oh, for deliverance! Oh, for deliverance!

But not till these two confess that they have fled will my lord take me back to his heart; and who will wring confession from them? Who will be my champion, to set me free from the shame that is killing me?

Shall I cheat the maddening hours by setting down my miserable story, to be read when I am gone by my love, who may judge me less harshly then? Surely the truth will prevail, if he hears it, as it were, from dead Enzeondo's grave.

At least let me wander a while among the remembrances of that gracious time when we were together, loving and trusting each other, before the fatal shadow of doubt fall between us.

Enzeondo Chaloner, the daughter of an American Senator, married at eighteen Lord Incheape, who was forty. He was my first and is my only love; no other passion has ever touched me. I went to him with all the treasures of freshest girlhood untasted but by himself.

It was himself I loved—his noble heart, his proud integrity; I gloried in his rank and power because they were part of himself. Even the disparity in our ages seemed to me fascinating, because it set him on a throne at the foot of which I could worship him.

He transplanted me into a brilliant circle, he called around us a troop of friends, and Incheape Fosse became the scene of continuous festivity, over which he loved to see me reign.

I had two friends, who soon won my tenderest love; my favorite was gentle Alice, the wife of honest Squire Cree; the other was the beautiful Laura Dellamere, a young widow. They both lived in the neighborhood, and came almost every day to me to assist me in entertaining the crows of guests that filled the castle.

At last one came, a fatal guest. His accursed name is Richard Acerrington. He came to us preceded by a brilliant reputation. In the Indian mutiny he had distinguished himself gallantly; there were many recs of his heroism and ability; we welcomed the young soldier among us with enthusiasm.

There were other whispers too. It was said that Colonel Acerrington had been Laura's first love—that she had sacrificed herself and him, at her nee's father's command, to marry the wealthy commoner, Sir Charles Dellamere, and that he was suing her again in her widowhood to lay his laurels at her feet and win her hand at last.

It was my dear lord's evil fate to bring him to our home—to present the brilliant stranger to me. Let me overpass the loathed recollection. Enough to say that he was base enough to make a blind of Mrs. Dellamere behind which to indulge a guilty passion for one who dreamed not of the truth—for happiness me.

One day accident disclosed what he fain would have hidden. The illness of his father recalled him home; he sought me in my privacy in haste to say adieu, and my unsuspecting coldness wrung sudden burning words from him. Mistaking his agitation for grief on Mrs. Dellamere's account, unwittingly I goaded him into a full declaration of his detested passion. I was stupefied, excess of emotion had made me dumb.

"Your amazement is well acted, if it is acted," mocked he. "If it is sincere, then I am as lost and disgraced a man as lives to curse himself this day."

I faltered Laura's name; his attention to her had been open and unqualified, to retract from them would most cruelly injure her.

He retorted with the utmost derision—quoted the old wrong she had done him—vaunted the completeness of his revenge.

In suddenly aroused wrath and scorn I drove him from me; as he hurried from my presence in writhing humiliation, my lord met him—marked his agitation as he passed with a hurried bow, and entering, saw his guest's agitation reflected on the face of his wife. Should I have confided all to him? Alas! I was but a girl—I was ashamed of the base love I had excited—I trembled for the consequences to my beloved husband should he hear how he had been insulted; I dared not confide the matter to Lord Incheape.

I gave a halting explanation of my emotion. Colonel Acerrington was leaving us, and by a careless word which he had dropped it was evident that he had been but amusing himself at the expense of my friend, Mrs. Dellamere. I had not concealed from him my anger, and he was leaving us forever.

My lord accepted the explanation at once; his honorable mind harbored no suspicion at the time; but he remembered the episode afterward. I did not see Laura for many days after that; but my sweet Alice told me that Colonel Acerrington had paid Laura a flying visit on his way to the railroad station. As she, Mrs. Cree, drove up to the Pavilion to call for Laura, as she usually did on her way to the Fosse, she met Acerrington on his horse. He passed her with a sardonic smile and bow—his face looked like a demon's. Laura denied herself to her, sending word that she was ill that morning and would not leave her room. "Their friendship has ruptured—I wonder why?" said my innocent Alice.

When Laura once more joined us she was strangely changed toward me. While jealously concealing her own pain she made me comprehend in a thousand subtle ways that I had fallen in her estimation—that she could no longer admit me to the inner sanctuary of her affection. What my enemy had said of me I know not. She taunted me once thus: "I had an adieu from Col. Acerrington: it was of a high tragedy sort; he raved of a mad love—of a fatal beauty of an insatiable coquette—I laughed; he was amusing." And so I saw she judged me guilty of playing with her lover's heart, and scorned me. Time passed; we heard that Colonel Acerrington had gone abroad; we left Salford for our house in London; we should have been happy as the angels but for the memory of that hateful episode. It haunted me

—a secret must invariably corrode in the heart of the guiltless. I began to question the past with distrust—to doubt the tendencies of my own nature—almost to believe myself in a measure guilty of levity, if of nothing worse, else how could that cold-hearted man of the world have ventured to depict my image to himself in warmer colors than those of formal acquaintance?

Laura's disdain oppressed me, too, and the consciousness of a secret withheld from my lord humiliated me. These disquietudes injured my health; my lord, with love's divining eye, observed the change; he wooed my confidence, he anxiously strove to discover the crumpled rose leaf in his darling's life—but I dared not confess it—I did not—I did not. I put him off with shallow pretenses; he understood that I did not care to share my every thought with him; he did not insist. But from that hour my husband changed toward me, his air of tranquil felicity fled, he became thoughtful, moody; he began to call me "child" oftener than "wife," as if he remembered regretfully his forty years beside my eighteen. Tenderly kind to me as ever, he was teaching himself the heart-breaking lesson that youth and middle age are not fitly yoked together.

Sweet love, they were—they were—no happier wife ever thanked God than yours before the serpent entered our Eden!

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

A Girl's Composition on Boys.

Boys is men that have got as big as their papas, and girls is young women that will be young ladies by-and-by. Man was made before woman. When God looked at Adam he said to himself: "Well, I guess I can do better than that if I try again," and then he made Eve. God liked Eve so much better than he did Adam that there has been more women than men in the world ever since. Boys are a trouble. They are very wearing on everything but soap. If I could have my way, half the boys in the world would be little girls and the other half dolls. My papa is so nice to me that I guess he must have been a girl when he was a little boy.

An exchange has an article on "Why Bees Make Honey?"—They make it to sell.

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