

CRUEL AS THE GRAVE; The Secret of Dunraven Castle.

BY ANNIE ASHMORE,

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

CHAPTER IX.—Continued.

He retired from that presence a disgraced man. A great trust had been confided to him, and he had betrayed it. He had been powerful—his power was overthrown; his had been a busy life and a useful—solitude and shame were to be his portion henceforward.

Fresh from this blow my lord wrote me; he pronounced my doom. We must part; never again should he take into his daily life the wife whose heart had strayed to such as Richard Accrington. He would not divorce me, because he deemed me guiltless in deed though not in heart. I should still bear his name if I chose, and reside in one of his domains, but never again should he look upon my face. This was your fiat, my lord, and I submitted. You never had to complain of rebellion in poor Engelande, had you? And though you put me away from you, you cannot prevent me from loving you still, loving you forever.

I chose the place of my exile myself; my lord offered me other homes, fairer and more cheerful. But a repudiated wife could find no room for critical comparison in her crushed heart, when her young, sweet life lay in ruins around her.

A lonely islet in the Hebridean Seas, far from a sterile coast—a fitting retreat for the bruised spirit that has no more zest for life. You grieved, they say, my lord, at poor Engelande's choice, condemning her to worse than death you still could spare a little pity for the trivial discomforts of her situation. Perhaps you read my motive wrong, and deemed it the self-mortification of the remorseful. Ah, no, my lord, I am guilty of nothing in the eyes of God save of loving you too well.

One precious boon you gave me, which proved that, say what you will, your instinct bade you trust me despite your cruel jealousy.

In my third year of exile, hearing that the starved life forces were running low, and that Engelande might die, you sent my sweet Ulva to be my consolation, my treasure, my dear savior from madness. Of that other inmate you placed in my home I disdain to complain; you judged it best for me, no doubt, that the director of my household should be that devoted friend who had clung to you so long, and who already knew something of our painful secret; but John Sircombe is no counselor or friend of mine—no slimy reptile is more shunned or loathed by me than he, the wretch whose baseness ruined me.

My Lord Incheape has brought home his heir to him, a distant cousin who was still at college when I married. He is a noble youth, I hear, and my lord is warmly attached to him. I do not grudge Edgar Arden his splendid prospects, yet often the heart-piercing recollection comes to me that it might have been my son that Lord Incheape loved and took pride in, but for the treachery of Richard Accrington and the falsehood of John Sircombe.

When these two confess the truth, my love will take me back to his heart and into his life. Ah, who will wring the truth from them? who will break my chain and set me free? who will wipe the imputed dishonor from Lord Incheape's name? Oh, for deliverance, deliverance.

CHAPTER X.

"THAT HAPPY BIRD."

Edgar Arden laid down the last page of my lady's story with an air of ineffable reverence; his whole manhood rose up in indignant protest against the cruel wrongs which had been heaped upon that sweet, devoted woman; he longed to be up and doing in her defense.

"Who will break your chain and set you free, sweet soul?" murmured he with generous emotion. "I will, if man can do it."

He recalled the long kept mystery which had hung about his kinsman Incheape, thought of his friends kept at a distance, his noble aspirations laid down all unfulfilled; how the proud man had suffered in thus wronging his innocent wife.

To bring back happiness, honor, a proud name vindicated—would not that be a triumph worth striving for? And the young man's heart glowed in her. Impulse, for he loved his kinsman, as the young French soldier loves the first Napoleon, for the traditions of his greatness and for the pity of his downfall.

Yet, in forming this resolve, Edgar was not blind to the difference it might make in his own fair future. As long as my Lord Incheape lived in estrangement from his wife, Edgar Arden was his heir; for five years he had believed himself the inevitable successor of the earl, had been fitting himself for his future station, and unfitting himself for a life of labor and obscurity.

All this passed clearly before him, yet with undimmed enthusiasm he still went back to his first dazzling impulse—"I shall be that guiltless lady's champion—I shall bring back happiness to her, and to the husband she loves so well!"

When Edgar again sought the ladies, they were settled with their work in the summer house of the courtly old garden, Mr. Sircombe in attendance with his book. Edgar was forced to put a strong

constraint upon himself to hide the scorn he felt for the catfish hound, but for Lady Incheape's sake he was enabled to treat him with nothing worse than grim civility. Still his private opinion found ample expression in his eyes; and this stirred up Sircombe's secret animosity to cold fury—he could have poisoned the supercilious intruder.

Lady Incheape had caused a fur rug to be spread for the convalescent in a pleasant nook, where he might rest and receive the strengthening salt breezes, while gazing on the free sweep of the ocean, dotted with distant sails.

She welcomed him to her side with a close clasp of her nervous hand, and an engrossing expectancy on her face; but they could not converse confidentially then, and he only gave her a true-hearted smile and pressed her hand. Beautiful Ulva was peculiarly radiant to day; she was innocently elated by the triumphant recovery of the stranger whom she secretly claimed as her own peculiar protegee, because as Kenmore had said, she had given him back his life. And Kenmore's prophecy stimulated the joyous young creature's interest in Edgar; though her womanhood was as yet unawakened, she wove pretty fancies about the handsome stranger, and loved to see him happy by the side of her darling mamma—Engelande.

Edgar thought he could fathom Lord Incheape's morbid feeling about his daughter; that he could never permit any honorable man to marry the daughter of an attainted name; so he had sent her to lonely Dunraven to be a companion to his wife.

What a cruel future for Ulva, if this were all.

The first moment that Lady Incheape and he were alone she turned to him eagerly.

"You have read it?" asked she, tremblingly, her sensitive face burning.

"Every word, Lady Dunraven, and with such reverence, such conviction, as only the truth could inspire," he answered. He could see how his words soothed and comforted her, and how her wrung and tortured susceptibilities rested in peace upon the welcome belief that he still revered her, eventhough she was a repudiated wife, with a disgraceful stigma upon her.

"Would it convince my lord?" she whispered with brightening eyes.

Poor Edgar dared not reply, for he knew the indomitable pride of Incheape.

"Ah, no; you think it won't," said she, mournfully. "Jealousy is cruel as the grave, and estranged love is harder to convince than indifference."

She sank back sighing; she was very grateful for his sympathy, but she had no hope.

"My whole heart is in the matter," said Edgar, humbly. "When I leave you it shall be to do what I can to obtain justice for you. Can you trust in me so far?"

"I believe in your loyalty and courage," said she, giving him her hand with one of her old-time fascinating smiles; "but I cannot see how mortal man can wring the truth from those two cravens who lied my happiness away."

"Let me try," he implored. "I may succeed."

She looked at him with starting tears. "Noble heart!" she murmured. "I do think you might. Very well, I make you my champion, and bid you God speed!"

He solemnly kissed her hand to seal the contract; he felt it binding as a sacred obligation.

She little dreamed who this champion was who had undertaken to restore her to her husband and home—that it was that very Arden whose solemn recognition at Incheape Fosse as the Earl's heir had so wrung her poor heart, and embittered her recollections of that stately home where once she reigned supreme.

But Edgar exulted over his unknown relationship; he felt strong to work for her with such a right as that, and how could Incheape hold out against his wife, when the very heir, whose interests were naturally antagonistic to hers, vowed that he believed in her wholly.

And still he hid his identity from her, fearing to chill her faith in him.

A few days restored Edgar almost completely. He yielded to his friend's earnest desire, and did not leave her the moment he was strong enough to travel.

"Think what a boon it is to me to have a friend once more," she pleaded. "It is like cold water to a prisoner perishing of thirst. Stay but a few days longer and let me grow strong by seeing your strength and goodness. I am so weary of sorrow, ah, so weary!"

But he trembled for dread while he stayed, for Ulva had stolen all his heart, and what if he should betray this to her, and disturb her peace?

Ulva was proud to lead him about, showing him all her haunts inside and outside of the tower and up and down the island; wherever her dainty caprice pointed, she was sure of a companion, docile and trusty, whose interest never flagged.

Of course they did not ramble about thus en tete-a-tete in the American mode. England, like France, sets up many barriers between the sexes, and the young lady's rank added to these.

Sometimes it was the grave and reverend Mr. Sircombe who chaperoned them, sometimes Ulva's own middle-aged maid, or her nurse, who carried her wraps after her, and sedately sat behind whenever they stopped to rest.

But no third person could interpose between these two young spirits, which day by day drew nearer to each other, drawn by mutual sympathies.

When Ulva took him among the Highland people who lived in the tiny hamlet by the shore, and supported themselves by fishing, and he saw how they loved their Colava, and how she loved them—that was another fascination to draw him to her. And when she perceived how simple, kind, and compassionate he was to her poor people, how eager to cheer the sorrowful and help the feeble, how untiring his interest in their picturesque daily lives—that wooed her toward him, as personal flattery never could have done.

Then they would find some silent nook amid the silver-gray rocks, on a divan of red-bell heather hedged round with the fox-glove standing high, and a carpet of bracken, gold and emerald, embroidered with hair stemmed blue-bells,

and the red crane's bill, and what he read so well she drank in with every feeling charmed, and that drew them very near each other's hearts.

Ah, yes; wherever her fearless, dainty feet could go she had taken him; and in spite of the boding watchful eyes of my lord's secretary and his heart-hiding smile, they had been happy, unutterably happy together, these two.

"I think Mr. Edgar has got to the end of my repertory," laughed Ulva to her stepmother one gloomy, gray afternoon as the three stood on a small stone terrace which overhung the scarped cliff on the inland side of the tower. "Even Mr. Sircombe has nothing left, I can see." That gentleman stood, as usual, a little apart in secret-forced deference to Lady Incheape's fierce repulsion.

"Between us," Ulva went on, "we have made him acquainted with all our barbaric, our demi-lunes, our terre-plein, our dungeons, everything that we have."

"Our small island holds few attractions to detain a stranger long among us," said Mr. Sircombe from his distance, with a serious air, "but I could direct Mr. Edgar to some noble ruins on the Scotch coast, far more worthy the explorer than our comparatively modern Dunraven Tower."

"Thank you," bowed Edgar, sarcastic ally, "but I shall not trouble you yet."

"Oh, Mr. Sircombe," cried Ulva looking up with sparkling eyes—"the undiscovered cell under the southern bastion! I have just recollected it. If Mr. Edgar and you were to find that mysterious entrance, that would amuse him. The cell has been sealed up for a hundred years, they say," (this to Edgar) "think what interesting antiquities might be lying there waiting for a discoverer. Nobody can find the entrance."

"Shall I search for it?" asked Edgar charmed with the idea of doing anything that might gratify her.

"Yes, and be sure and discover it, then we shall always call it 'Edgar's cell,'" laughed Ulva, with innocent elation.

They explained that the ancient dungeons of Dunraven had been hewn out of the solid rock foundations of the tower, the entrances so contrived as to be difficult to discover. All the other rock chambers had been found, and cleared of debris, but the entrance to the dungeon of the southern bastion was yet a mystery.

"If I may utter an opinion," interposed Lady Incheape, anxiously, "I would say that Mr. Edgar is not yet quite robust enough to undertake anything so laborious."

Ulva's anxiety awoke on the instant. "Let us defer the search then," she pleaded, "but you must not go without making the discovery."

"There is one thing you have not shown me, that I dare not ask to see," said Edgar's eyes, "your own sweet heart."

"We have not shown Mr. Edgar Sleat-na-Vreckee from the sea," said Mr. Sircombe, goaded by that too eloquent glance, to interpose his word, at the risk of provoking one of Lady Incheape's involuntary icy looks. "The water looks so calm this afternoon that I am sure it would be an agreeable time to row round the isle. And Kenmore, I know, is disengaged."

As he said this rather eagerly, Edgar could not help gazing curiously at him, and speculating as to how far a mutual sentiment might carry these two towards becoming accomplices to get him away from Sleat-na-Vreckee.

Kenmore and Sircombe, banded together against the unwelcome guest, might very possibly proceed to take high ground to get rid of him, might even carry him off in spite of his remonstrances and land him on the Scottish coast.

Edgar laughed at himself for this wild fancy; yet Sircombe was strangely pale.

Ulva's thoughts flew to Kenmore and his vengeful threat, and, womanlike, she did not laugh the fancy away. She objected to the trip.

"Too cold for an invalid," said she.

"Merely bracing," smiled Mr. Sircombe. "I am sure Mr. Edgar is not afraid;" and he darted a taunting glance at him.

Poor Edgar! that settles it.

"Afraid of what, or of whom?" asked he, laughingly, and so little did he relish the taunt that he did not even invite Ulva to be one of the party, lest Sircombe should think he meant to shelter himself from possible unpleasantness behind her presence. And she waited, wondering and disappointed, to be asked, and could scarce endure to see him go without her.

Mr. Sircombe disappeared to make the requisite arrangements with Kenmore.

Edgar seized the opportunity to ask Ulva to walk part of the way down the cliff with him; and so, with a sweet, kind smile and "bon voyage!" from Lady Incheape, they started.

Oh, first love! what sweetest poet ever could paint you sweet or pure enough?

They wandered down the precipitous pathway; they were soon out of sight of the Tower; then the way grew steeper, and what could he do but take her little hand and nestle it on his arm to support her? And when, with a whirl and a triumphant bird-scream Ulva's little pet lark dropped down from heaven into her bosom, and she covered it with her lovely hand and called it her darling, true heart, her little constancy—what lover could have resisted the exquisite delight of uttering the words that filled his heart?

"That happy bird!" murmured Edgar, dreamily. "A thousand times a day I envy him. Our stories are so like each other at first; you saved both our lives, and we both return you our whole souls, full of gratitude—and love. But you have taken the bird to your heart, and I—"

"And you must not quote unknown authors on a steep path," interrupted Ulva, at last finding presence of mind to stop the passionate words, without owning that she understood them. She had grown very pale and the tears were in her eyes, but she smiled for all that, and he was actually deceived. As she ran on a few steps with her lark flying by her shoulder, Edgar almost cursed himself for the mad impulse which had caused him so to forget duty and honor.

He looked so pale and grieved when at last she turned round, that her heart swelled with sudden tender remorse, and she went back, and laid her bird in his hands, very trustfully; then moved off and gathered a little knot of blue-bells and white heather, which she offered him next.

"You must fasten it into my coat for me, then; you see both my hands are engaged in forming a nest for True-Heart," said he, almost humbly, for his conscience smote him again.

They stood to perform the operation, two happy, absorbed young creatures, tasting for the first time the most delicious draught this earth has to bestow.

They had reached the base of the cliff, and were in the edge of a thicket of the hardy Scotch fir which girdled the rude peak; still further down, but invisible from their position, the few huts clustered on the edge of the beach.

Ulva's wide sleeves fell back as she raised her lovely arms to fasten the wild flowers on his breast, and as she threw back her head, her deep, velvety eyes looked upward—the most beautiful, the most dangerous look a woman's eyes can give; while her milk-white throat and all the melting undulations of her sumptuous bust were seen in their most fascinating attitude.

Edgar stood motionless as a statue, and pale as one, till a visible tremor shook him. Then these words burst from him:

"Ulva! Ulva! If I cannot win you for my wife, my life will be a curse to me!"

She started from him with a stifled cry, and stood off, gazing wild-eyed at him, like some beautiful, startled creature too proud to fly; all her woman's pride was up in arms against this abrupt, unceremonious wooing, and her blood fired—the blood of the ancient Incheapes, that never brooked insult.

"I—fear—you—have—mistaken—the—person!" gasped she, word by word, for, with all her wrath, something seemed to be wringing the blood out of her laboring heart, and to be turning the whole world sad and dull.

"Ah! Do not look at me with that expression—you torture me!" cried Edgar, in passionate grief. "Deserve your indignation for daring to speak of love without Lord Incheape's permission gained first; but I do not deserve your scorn and loathing; oh, no, sweet Ulva, no!"

The sound of measured footsteps put an end to the scene, leaving the pair distracted, Edgar with remorse and grief, Ulva with amazement at his last words, mounting above her other emotions.

He knew that she was Lord Incheape's daughter! Who, then, was this who came to their asylum knowing all about the secret which even she had not penetrated!

It was Mr. Sircombe who strode upon them, so grim and ghastly that if either had been capable of examining him they would have seen at once that he had overheard the last speech at least, if no more, and that his mind was made up.

He made no comment, however, except to announce in a toneless voice that Kenmore would follow to the shore at once, and that he would recommend Mr. Edgar to put on one of the fur coats which he had brought over his arm.

"I shall leave you here, Mr. Edgar," said Ulva, in a low voice, with her eyes on the ground. And although he felt as if he would commit some madness if she left him without one sign of softened feeling, she moved away like one in a dream, her lark fitting about her gayly, and climbed up the steep without one backward glance.

"Now," said Sircombe in a terrible voice, when she was quite gone, "are you satisfied that your honor is no safeguard for that defenseless lady?"

Edgar turned a gaze upon his would-be judge that checked him like a stone wall.

"Peace! defamer of the innocent!" said he. "You babble of honor? You who betrayed Lady Incheape by a lie!"

"Hush—sh! Who are you that knows so much of the secret history of Incheape?" whispered Sircombe, aghast. "But not another word here—follow me—this way, Sir Spy; and, now, please to explain yourself."

CHAPTER XI.

"WHY CALL IT MURDER?"

He had led the way round an abutment of the cliff, perhaps a score of feet from the path; they came to a halt in a hollow, close under the cliff, in a curious niche, protected from inquisitive eyes by a great granite boulder perched on a slight elevation opposite the cleft in the cliff wall.

A mass of wild honeysuckle and ivy mantled far up the rugged crag; glancing upward one saw that they stood directly beneath the southern bastion of the tower.

"Now, sir, I demand an explanation of your words," said Sircombe, at white heat.

"Mr. Sircombe, I owe you no explanation of either motive or meaning; but, of my own free will, I will tell you that I am one who knows the fact of your treachery to Lady Incheape in her hour of need; and that I hold the power in my hands to have you driven from under yonder roof in merited disgrace."

The director grew ashen pale, and recoiled in dismay.

"Then it is as I feared," he muttered, between his teeth. "She has made you her confidant, and you believe her, of course. But you may not find that Lord Incheape is equally credulous."

"Oh, I intend to cause you to convince him," retorted Edgar, quietly; "you shall repeat the conversation which you overheard that night between the lady and Colonel Accrington; and when Lord Incheape compares your testimony with his wife's the truth shall prevail."

"And what power do you imagine you possess over me, to force me into this act of self-destruction?" demanded Sircombe, his hollow eyes flaring.

"I make no threats," replied Edgar, scornfully. "I shall give you a chance to act like an honest man."

For a long pause, neither spoke. The hush of death brooded around them; no leaf stirred nor bird sang; the heavens hung low and gray.

John Sircombe was looking this calamity which had befallen him in the

face, and the longer he looked the more appaled he was.

Lady Incheape had rebelled at last, and had chosen a champion who seemed resolute to succeed in righting her wrongs. And her vindication meant Sircombe's ruin, for he had not only withheld the testimony which would have saved her but he had skillfully kept alive the smoldering fires of Incheape's suspicion and jealousy ever since—had, in fact, done his best to keep them estranged.

At first he had done this through the love of power and an important place; but since Ulva came to grow up under his eyes into a flower of all mastering loveliness—ah, since then it had grown death to be discovered and cast out in disgrace!

And now this man had come, young, care-free, pitiless in his insolent powers of fascination, and he loved her!

"You give me the chance to act like an honest man," repeated Sircombe, bitterly. "What, then, if I should propose to buy your honesty with mine?"

"Ah, you mean—"

"Yes, I mean Lady Ulva. If I promise to make reparation to Lady Incheape, will you promise to leave Lady Ulva forever?"

"I shall make no such compromise with you," said Edgar, slowly. "I love the lady, and I believe I shall yet receive Lord Incheape's permission to woo her."

"Ah, you say this to my face," cried Sircombe, fiercely, and he made a gesture so full of maddened fury that Edgar took an involuntary step backward from the distorted visage that bent toward him.

As he did so the tangled vines parted beneath his weight, a dark aperture yawned behind him, and the next moment he fell headlong backward, clutching wildly at the vines, which broke in brittle handfuls and then closed over the aperture as before.

Sircombe had uttered a yell of warning—Edgar wassilent—and started forward to aid him—but he was too late. He gazed at the leafy screen with dazed senses; he put out his hand to tear it apart, but paused in the very act, and for a long, long minute considered, with fixed eye and hands outstretched.

There was neither voice nor movement within.

Nothing but the lowering heavens and the motionless trees to be seen.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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The natives in South Africa are doubtless very much interested in watching the plans of white men to civilize people of their own color.

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