

Perhaps he did not like it. She was so selfish—she had only thought of herself—never of him.

'Sir Daryl!' she said, softly. 'I am so sorry—if you are angry. But you need not do it. I only thought of you because you said you would help me, because you are always so kind and true, and your name has never been connected with any girl's; so I thought it would do you no harm just to pretend to be engaged to me. But if you love someone, and she—she would hear that you were going to marry someone else—do not think of it. My own life is spoilt—I would not spoil yours. And, after all—recklessly—what does it matter if they find out it was not true? Why should I mind? Why should I care for anything now?'

He turned round, and his face worked strangely at her despairing words. 'Poor little girl!' he said, pityingly. 'Poor little Molly! I will do anything in the world for you. I will certainly pretend to be engaged to you for as long as you like. And, my child, do not grieve too much. Do not his very actions show how unworthy he is to be loved?'

'Yes—yes,' she answered, hastily. 'I know it—I shall realise it some day. And you, how can I thank you enough for your goodness to me?'

'I don't want any thanks.' With an effort he forced a smile. 'It is not a very great hardship to be engaged to Molly Clifford even if it is only a pretence.'

But Molly's eyes were filling with tears. She took his proffered hand and pressed a light kiss on it, and then fled away from the conservatory. And he? He looked longingly at the place where her sweet lips had touched, and his face seemed to grow older, and the weary look returned to his eyes.

'The scoundrel!' he cried between his teeth. 'To have the precious gift of her love, and then to cast it away! He gave a hard, mirthless laugh. 'She said if there is someone I love!' he ejaculated bitterly. 'Ah, if she only knew!'

IV.

Six months passed by, and Molly was still nominally engaged to Sir Daryl Harcourt. She had been afraid to break it off too soon, for she knew Lewis Pleydell would have triumphed at once; and so she let matters rest, especially as Sir Daryl never said anything one way or the other.

Meantime a strong friendship sprang up between the two, and Molly unconsciously began to lean on the baronet more and more. His estate was only a few miles off where she lived in her father's pretty vicarage, and at first he used to ride over to see her every day.

Thus it was he who roused her from the despairing lethargy into which she had fallen after her return from Alton Court. He took her out riding, he talked brightly to her, he insisted on her interesting herself in the matters and books of the day, until youth reasserted itself, and now, after all these months, Molly was her old bright self again, and her ringing laugh would once more be heard about the old place.

Being looked on as an engaged couple, naturally she and Sir Daryl were thrown a great deal together; but at last Molly was made to feel the awkwardness of her position, and the occurrence woke up strange emotions in her heart, and made her pause to ask herself what it all would lead to.

She had been to dine with a cousin in the neighbouring village. Sir Daryl, as a matter of course, was asked too.

The party consisted chiefly of young people, and it was a merry evening altogether.

Christmas had not been over very long, and a branch of mistletoe, getting now rather faded, still hung over the drawing-room door.

Lottie Crane—Molly's cousin—was in a mischievous mood. She glanced up at Sir Daryl's strong though somewhat serious face as he came in with the other men from the dining-room.

'Do you know,' she said, smiling, 'we all think you and Molly the strangest engaged couple we have ever seen? I have never seen anyone so formal and so stiff. Do you ever have any love-making? Do you—impressively—ever kiss?'

'We never make any demonstrations of affection in public, if you mean that,' cried Molly, with flaming cheeks. 'We are not so vulgar!'

Lottie looked at her with a covert smile.

'That is not the question,' she said. 'I am wondering if you ever do so in private.'

But Molly forbore to answer. She turned away lest Sir Daryl should catch sight of her blushing face.

But Lottie was irrepressible. 'Now, Sir Daryl,' she cried, 'I dare you to take Molly under the mistletoe there and kiss her before us all!'

The baronet hesitated. His heart was beating quickly at the very notion, but he feared to risk Molly's displeasure. He renounced the idea with a sigh.

'I dare anything! I will kiss you under the mistletoe if you will come,' he said, audaciously. 'Quick! Crane is not looking!'

But Lottie waved him aside scornfully.

'I told you so!' she cried. 'I dared you to kiss Molly, and you are—afraid!'

A new suggestion sprang to Sir Daryl's mind. If he refused they might grow suspicious; he could explain this to Molly afterwards.

'Afraid?' he cried, with equal scorn. 'Come; let us show them, Molly!' And he held out his hand; and, as if in a dream, the girl let him lead her under the mistletoe.

'Our first kiss, Molly!' he whispered gently. Then he bent his head and their lips met.

'Now,' he cried triumphantly to Mrs Crane, 'you will not again tell me that I am—afraid!'

But he wondered at the whiteness of Molly's cheeks as she hurried away.

Had he offended her? Would she ever forgive him? Was it such a dreadful thing for her to undergo just this one kiss which had set all his pulses beating?

But he could not tell, for Molly never said a word or alluded to the occurrence in any way, and he dare not bring it up himself. But somehow since that evening a fortnight ago a stronger wall of reserve seemed to have risen up between them, and matters were never the same again.

It was a bright morning, and Molly was in the garden looking around and wondering how long it would be before the snowdrops peeped out from

'I have been wondering, Molly,' she said, 'when your marriage is coming off. You have been engaged for six months—now, and really there is nothing to wait for.'

Molly turned away, and a troubled look came to her eyes. Perhaps you are right,' she said. 'I will think about it.'

Remorse filled the girl's heart. She had never thought of the matter in this light before—that this engagement was not fair to Sir Daryl. Of course, he might want to marry, and she, for her own foolish ends, was keeping him from his heart's desire. She must release him at once! She stopped, almost afraid at the sudden pain which pierced her heart. How she would miss him! How could she do without him—who had sacrificed his very life's happiness for her?

She wrung her hands. It must be broken off immediately! He was coming this afternoon; she would tell him then. She must get it over as soon as possible, in case her courage failed her. How weak she had been—how selfish! while he— She covered her face with her hands. What would she do when he had gone?

Sir Daryl was anxious and depressed as he walked down the small path which led to the vicarage. He had heard that morning that Miss Wyndham had broken off her engagement with Lewis Pleydell.

Molly came to meet him along the garden-path. He saw with despair that her face was white, too. Had the news already reached her that Lewis Pleydell had been jilted?

'I want to speak to you,' said Molly, plunging at once into the dreaded topic, 'about—our engagement. It has struck me lately that when I selfishly asked you to comply with my wishes I had not taken you into the arrangement at all, and—the present state of things is not fair to you.'

'Then what would you like me to do now?' he asked, slowly.

'I—I think the engagement has lasted long enough,' she answered.

'Just as you wish,' he replied. But still he did not look at her. 'Then we had better give it out that it was broken off by mutual consent.'

Molly's face grew whiter and whiter, and tears of pain sprang to her eyes.

glad to be a stop-gap,' he said, satirically; and then he turned from her, and walked quickly down the path and out of the vicarage gate.

V.

Great festivity reigned at the Hall, for Lady Audley was giving a dance. Lights flashed brilliantly, and myriads of carriages drove up to the door.

Molly was sitting listlessly by a window waiting for her partner, for she had sent him away to get her an ice. A quick step approached, and halted suddenly in front of her.

'Molly!' cried a soft, exultant voice. The girl started and looked up. How strange that Lewis Pleydell should be here to-night!

'How do you do?' she said, indifferently. 'I did not know you knew the Audleys.'

'And I did not know I should see you here,' he cried, passionately. 'Oh, Molly, what ages since we met! My darling, if you only knew what it was to me to see you again!'

'I do not understand you!' she cried coldly. 'Nor have you any right to talk to me thus. Where is Miss Wyndham?'

'Myra?—What? Do you mean to say you have not heard that our engagement is broken-off? Ah, Molly, I understand your cruel manner now. But I am free—free to marry you, my darling.'

She stopped him with flashing eyes. 'But I do not want to marry you!' she cried, contemptuously. 'If you were the only man in the world I would not marry you!'

His expression grew dark at her scornful tones. 'But you love me,' he said, coming nearer. 'I defy you to say you do not love me! You loved me when I was engaged, and you only said you would marry Harcourt out of pique. You never loved him.'

He paused, startled by the anger blazing from her eyes.

'Never loved Sir Daryl?' she repeated, passionately. 'I love him so much that I would never marry another man while he is alive, and I do not mind acknowledging it, for he is worthy of any woman's love. You—scornfully—might have fascinated me for a time, but only Sir Daryl has ever won my love!'

The intensity of her voice carried conviction with it. With a malignant look at her fair face, Pleydell gave a harsh, baffled laugh, and turned on his heel and left her.

The curtains over the window parted, and Sir Daryl stepped out of the balcony. He stretched out his arms yearningly towards the startled girl.

'Molly!' he cried, 'is this true; and have I been mistaken all this time? I thought you broke off our engagement because you had heard that Pleydell was free; but through my unintentional eavesdropping I find I was all wrong. Molly darling—passionately—were my ears deceived, or did you say you loved me?'

And Molly, in the safe shelter of his arms, whispered back, 'Yes!'



'I do not want to marry you,' said Molly. 'If you were the only man in the world I would not marry you.'

the ground. Everything had been so peaceful lately, but to-day that peace was to be disturbed, and her mind receive an unpleasant shock.

She was thinking of Lewis Pleydell this morning, and wondering how it was that she regretted him so little. Nothing but scorn and contempt seemed to be connected with his memory, and she heaved a sigh of relief to think that he never knew how much she had grieved for his defection at the time.

Lady Audley, who lived up at the Hall, was driving past the vicarage, and, seeing Molly in the garden, stopped her carriage and went and spoke to her.

How eager he was to end it all, and probably had wished it all over long ago, but had been too noble to suggest it! And all this time, when she had been selfishly enjoying his society, he was trying to find means to cut the tie.

'That would be best,' she answered, indistinctly. 'I am sorry; I ought to have stopped it before—I ought to have considered you. Why did you not tell me?' She paused, because her voice was choked with tears. She scarcely knew what she had expected; she only felt he need not have been in such hot haste to acquiesce in her decision.

He laughed harshly. 'I was very

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