

slipped away because he did not wish his name to appear in the matter.

"The parson" held his peace; so did Jenny Garth; and there was no proof against anyone known to be among Mr. Vail's enemies. There were those who believed that Mr. Churchill could have spoken had he wished; for if he had had no warning, how came he to discover the fire so opportunely? But he was often out late at night, and his passing the house at the right moment might have been a coincidence. At all events, he would become but the more popular in the neighbourhood for "knowing how to hold his tongue."

Stainforth suffered intensely from his burns, for some time, and could neither sleep nor eat for the fever in his veins. Often, at first, he knew only dimly what was passing round him, and seeing Consuelo's face constantly near him, he believed it to be a dream. By and by, however, he realised that he was lying ill at her house, and remembered everything that had led to his presence there.

He tried to be sorry and to wish that he were at home, lonely though that home might be, but he could not be sorry. Physical weakness made it difficult for him to do battle with himself, as he had long grown accustomed to doing in his strength, and he resigned himself to being quietly happy because he could not help it—happier than he had been since the days when he was Lance Stainforth. But that was before he had begun to think.

Some times when he could not rest, but would lie tossing with fever, and the throbbing pain of his burns, Consuelo would lay her little hand, very shyly at first, then with less self-consciousness on his hot forehead, smoothing back the short, dark hair. He could have died happily thus, he told himself, with her hand on his head. "If only I had known her six months sooner than I did," he would say over and over, "she was a child then, but I should have loved her, and that miserable flirtation of mine would never have been begun. Lady Wenwick would be an innocent woman to-day; poor old Jim would probably have been alive still, contented, if not happy, and I—I should have been free to try and make a good woman care for me."

When the bitterness of his regrets would become almost too deep to bear, he would try to remind himself that perhaps his suffering in the past had not been all in vain. Through the expiation of his own sin, he might have been able to help others, whose lives he would not have touched in happiness and good fortune. But with Consuelo near him, ministering to him, his yearning was hot in his veins, and he could only remember that he was a man who loved a woman, and was unfit to ask that she should share his life.

"I ought not to wish her to share such a life as mine," he would remind himself sternly, "even if I had a right to ask her, which I haven't, and never shall. My life must always be one of hardship, for atonement's sake. Whenever I find that I am becoming too happy and comfortable in one place, I must go to another—I must 'move on' always, doing what good I can, and bearing my cross. I should be a brute even to want to lay that cross on a girl's shoulders."

So when he had begun to think, he would argue, and the first sweet contentment of his convalescence was gone, as if scorched by the flames which had burned his flesh.

Mr Vail had recovered from his woe attack of rheumatism before Stainforth was able to talk with the young "assistant nurse," as Sister Wells called Consuelo; and freed from her attendance upon her father, the girl had more time to give to their guest. When he was strong enough to listen, she told him how parish affairs were going, and spoke of the progress of repairs on the burned wing. The curate, Mr Danvers, was doing very well; he had preached a good sermon on Sunday; everybody seemed satisfied with his work, but was anxious to have Mr Churchill back when he was quite, quite strong enough—not before.

When Stainforth had been ill for a week, he was allowed one afternoon to sit up in bed for the first time, propped up among some pillows. His mind had been as clear as ever now, for two or three days, and he knew that he was allowing the image of Consuelo Vail to dwell too constantly there. He knew that she coloured all his thoughts; that he had but to shut his eyes for her face to appear, like a fair apparition in the dark; that when she went out of the room, he watched the door continually for her return; that when she was with

him, he was miserable lest she should go.

"Miss Vail said she would come in and sit with you for a bit, if I wanted to go out for a little exercise about this time," announced Sister Wells. "You won't mind if I do go, will you?"

"Of course not," said Stainforth. "But please don't trouble Miss Vail. I am perfectly comfortable, and shan't want anything till you come back. There's no reason why I shouldn't be left alone. I must get used to it, you know, for in a day or two I shall be well enough to crawl home, and—"

"Can't you pretend to yourself that this is home?" asked Consuelo, smiling her lovely, shy smile, as she came in just in time to catch the last words.

"No; for I am happy here," Stainforth had said, before he could stop the words, and then regretted them, for though they were true, he had no right to tell such truth to Consuelo Vail. "I am also in danger of growing lazy," he went on, trying to make his voice sound indifferent, and succeeding in making it sound very cold. "You are too good to me. I must go away as soon as I can."

By this time Sister Wells had slipped out for her walk. Consuelo and Stainforth were alone together for the first time since the day of their meeting in the fog, nearly five years ago. Each thought of that day, and each supposed that the other would not; for the man was not at all sure that Consuelo recognised him as Lord Stainforth, and remembered the hour or two that they had spent in each other's society so long ago; while the girl fancied that the little episode would have been without importance in his mind.

"If you are so anxious to go and leave us," Consuelo said, rather sadly, "we shall think that we let you miss things you would have at home, and we should be so sorry to think that."

Something in the sweet young voice quickened the beating of the man's heart. Instinct told him temptingly, at this moment, that he had a strong influence upon the girl, that it was in his power to make her care for him as she never had cared, never would care for anyone else in the world. He did not deliberately say this thing to himself, and if he thought had taken form in his mind, he would have put it away as monstrous conceit, protesting that he must be mad to dream it for a moment. But he felt the truth with his heart, not with his brain, and he felt also that, if he were to act consistently with principle, he would do what he could to displease her, now at the very threshold of their renewed acquaintance.

It was this instinct which had put ice into his voice, to contradict the warmth of his impulsive words. "She had better dislike me, and then there will be no danger for either of us," something had whispered insidiously, and kept him bound in silence. If he did not answer her gentle little hint, she would think him a disagreeable fellow, ungrateful, and cold-hearted; and it was better so. But it hurt him horribly to hurt her, and he had to press his lips tightly together to keep back the words which she would have been glad to hear.

Consuelo saw him grow pale, and so the effect of his intended unkindness was lost upon her, for she fancied that he was suffering, and unable to speak.

"I mustn't make you talk," she said, and sighed in sympathy with his pain. But the sigh was a knife-thrust at Stainforth's heart, for he believed that his sulky silence had caused it. To save his life he could not have helped turning to look wistfully at the girl, and the hungry dark eyes met the blue grey ones, which spoke the love she would have died sooner than speak with her lips.

He saw the look, and his pale, worn face flushed darkly to the forehead. Again Consuelo misunderstood. "Are you suffering?" she exclaimed. "Can I do anything for you?"

"You can do everything," was the answer in his heart, but aloud he said, almost chillingly: "No, thank you, there is nothing that you can do. I want nothing."

Now, at last, the girl began to understand that his coldness was not caused by pain, and she wondered, miserably, how she could have offended him.

"Perhaps," she thought sadly, "he dislikes me because he associates me with the past that he has evidently been trying to put away far from him. Perhaps it worries him to have me in the room. It never occurred to me before, that it might be so. I'm afraid I am very stupid." The girl felt suddenly as

if she had a great lump of ice in her breast, which must always be there all the rest of her life. "I ought to have understood," she said to herself, "when I heard him tell Sister Wells not to call me, that it was because he really would rather be alone than have me with him."

She had been sitting by the bed side, but now she rose, her cheeks brightly pink, and her eyes sparkling with tears which she would not let fall. "Perhaps you could sleep if I went out," she suggested, trying to speak lightly. "Will you try if I go?"

"Yes, I will try," he replied.

"And you will touch the bell on the little table if you need anything."

"I am sure I shall not need anything," he said.

There was nothing for Consuelo to do but to go. As soon as she was outside the door the tears she had held back streamed from her eyes.

"Yes, it is certain that he dislikes me," she thought. "But how different he is now that he is getting better. When he was very ill he seemed to cling to me, and want me with him. Sister Wells often asked me to stay. But now—in what a tone he said: 'There is nothing that you can do.'"

With the shutting of the door the grimness of his fate seemed to close in round Stainforth irrevocably. He would have given the world to call Consuelo back, and yet he could not have done so for all that world.

He loved her; she meant youth, and life, and the sweetness of the one Woman to him, but she was not to be his, and because of the revealing look in her dear eyes, he must make himself hateful in them. He must begin to do it now, and go on doing it until he could leave her, never to see her any more, save from a distance. It would be the kindest way, therefore the only way to take; for if she learned to care she would be miserable. Now, to find him hateful, sullen, ungracious, and ungrateful, would hurt her girlish vanity, perhaps, but scarcely more. Yet, how he wanted her! How his soul cried out for her to come back.

He wished that he were very ill again, and not responsible for his own words and actions; he had been happy when he thought her face a dream, and had tried to go on dreaming. But dreams were not for him. Life was very real, and it had to be lived.

By and bye Sister Wells came back, and was surprised to find Miss Vail sitting by a window at the end of the corridor, not far from the closed door of the invalid's room. She spoke brightly, saying that she had come out to let Mr Churchill sleep, remaining close by in case of need; but her eyes looked as if she had been crying. Mr Churchill seemed feverish, and had certainly not slept. Sister Wells' curiosity was roused, and she determined to find out if anything had happened; for she had been weaving a very pretty little romance round the year and Consuelo Vail, and now she pictured a lovers' quarrel.

"Poor little Miss Vail has been sitting outside in the corridor crying," she announced, as she mixed water with Stainforth's cooling draught, and peeped at him from under her eyelashes. "I wonder what can be the matter?"

Stainforth did not answer, but she had the satisfaction of seeing the blood rush to his face, leaving him paler than before, as it ebbed slowly away. As he gave her no opening, the nurse was obliged reluctantly to drop the subject; but soon after her patient began to speak again about going home. "I am so much better and stronger now, that I shall be able to get away tomorrow, I should think."

"Certainly not," replied Sister Wells. "Why, I have been engaged by Mr Vail to stop till next week, and take care of you, when you are putting on the airs of a well man, sir? How could you do your own bandages, I should like to know. You couldn't; and until your

burns are well, you are at my mercy and Miss Vail's."

Again Stainforth was silent, but he was not convinced. He could not continue to see Consuelo as he was seeing her now, and be certain that he would not fall in his newly adopted policy. He would almost surely yield to an impulse stronger than any policy, and ask the girl's forgiveness for his seeming ingratitude, and explain it all too clearly for his own peace of mind—perhaps for hers. And if he were to be in the same house without seeing her, knowing that he had driven her away by his ruthlessness that he had hurt her in heart and girl's pride, he would suffer too intensely. No, the situation was now too severely strained, after the scene which had just passed. He determined that next day he would test his strength by getting up, when the nurse had left him alone, and try to dress himself. If he could succeed in doing that, no one could say that he was not able to go home to the vicarage, where his housekeeper would look after him well enough.

According to this resolution, he made the effort next morning, and though he was surprised at his own weakness, he succeeded in dressing himself without fainting.

Sister Wells had gone out, making an errand to the chemist's, in the village, an excuse for her daily exercise, and this time Miss Vail had not been asked to sit with him in the nurse's absence. Thus Stainforth had more than half an hour to spend in carrying out his plan; and weak as he was, he had needed every one of those thirty minutes. At last, when he was dressed, and the bandage across his forehead folded as narrowly as he dared, he decided to try going downstairs. Consuelo often wrote letters for her father at this time of day, he had heard her saying to the nurse, and probably he should find the two together, and surprise them.

Very slowly, he went down the shallow steps of the winding stairway, that led to a part of the house which he did not yet know. It was humiliating to find that he had to keep one bandaged hand on the balusters, to steady himself, but, after all, he thought that he was doing very well. He would no doubt be able to persuade Mr. Vail that he was quite able to take up ordinary life again, where he had laid it down, eight days ago.

Far away in the west wing, a sound of pounding came to his ears; the carpenters at work; but there was no other sound in the house, and he paused at the foot of the stairs, uncertain which way to go. He felt curiously giddy, too, and was glad that there was no one near for a moment, until he should have time to recover himself.

He was in a small, old-fashioned square hall, with wainscotted walls, and a big latticed window at one end, so draped with creepers that the place was fitted with a soft emerald light, as if the sunshine filtered through a transparent green curtain. Opposite, was a door that led out into the garden, and this stood half open. The sweet, yet melancholy fragrance of aromatic autumn flowers hung in the air.

Set against the wainscoting, near the foot of the stairs, was a big, chintz-covered sofa, and near by was a table on which asters and marigolds lay scattered, ready to be arranged in some bowls and vases in the centre of the brilliant heap.

This was the picture Stainforth saw as he stood hesitating. "She must be out there in the garden," he thought. "In a moment she will be coming in with more flowers. What a fool I am to be so weak. She must not see me like this. If I sit down for a moment, perhaps, I shall be myself again. I—"

But the thought was never finished. His head swam, and he staggered to the big sofa, falling back upon it, dead white, just as Consuelo came in, with her hands full of late roses.

(To be Continued.)

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