

a prank? I'll have no — Popery in my family. So just you change your tune, Miss, or I'll show you the way! What was that fool, Miss What's-her-name, about, that she allowed this — rubbish? Tell that governess woman,' he yelled to the butler, 'to come here at once. I'll give her the rough side of my tongue in a way she'll be apt to remember!'

'Father, father, please' cried Mechtilde, 'it was not her fault — don't scold her,' then — seeing the appeal to be worse than useless — she turned on James Durrant her beseeching eyes, pleading the more piteously through the dimness of their tears.

What man could refuse that mute cry for help? With a bold movement James strode across the room, and was out at the door in a breath, unobserved by Lord Harlath in his blind passion. To catch up the footman who had been sent to fetch Miss Swanton was the work of a moment, and slipping a sovereign into the man's palm he said meaningly 'The governess has retired for the night.' The man nodded without changing his well-trained countenance, and returned with this message.

Mechtilde understood something of this little by-play, and if her simple goodness was shocked by the falsehood, she was human enough to thank her friend with her eyes as he re-entered the room.

By this time the old lord was too exhausted to storm any longer, and the girl took the first opportunity of leaving his presence, and the only consideration which induced Durrant to control his active indignation against his host was the certainty that a quarrel with the father would ruin any chance of ever again befriending the daughter.

CHAPTER IV.

Lord Harlath spent the next morning in a manner highly satisfactory to himself; first by interviewing Miss Swanton, and speaking to her in terms which could leave no self-respecting person any alternative save to depart from his employment on the spot, and secondly, by composing a most insulting letter to Mrs. Talbot, dismissing her from her post. That was, however, no more than she expected.

As for Mechtilde, she set off after breakfast with her maid to try and find out where was the nearest Catholic Church, and, to her relief, discovered a chapel just on the other side of the Park, where Mass was said on Sundays.

On her return home she was bitterly grieved to find Miss Swanton preparing for instant departure, and though the high-spirited girl resolved to face her trials bravely, yet she became so ill towards evening with violent headache that her appearance at dinner was quite out of the question.

Next morning, though still suffering, she rose in time to go to church, and bidding her maid, who was not quite ready, follow her, went down into the hall; but her father suspecting her intention of attending Mass was prepared to thwart it, and was leaning against the closed hall door.

She stopped, being taken aback, and looked helplessly at him. But he made no move, and left it to her to speak first, when she presently did, asking him gently to allow her to pass.

'Where are you going to?' he demanded.

'To Mass, father.'

'Then to Mass you will not go. At 11 o'clock you shall come to church with me like a dutiful daughter.'

'Father, I cannot do that. Oh, father, do let me pass!' she pleaded, but one might as well have prayed one of the marble statues that adorned the hall to move from its pedestal.

Mechtilde was firmly resolved to reach the chapel in time for Mass, but it was quite plain that she would not be able to get out of the house by the hall door. Then there flashed into her mind the idea of trying some other means of exit. She walked quietly away and went into the library.

Lord Harlath, concluding that she wished to get their guest to plead her cause, smiled to himself, and for some moments did not trouble to follow.

The girl crossed the room without observing James Durrant, who was writing at one of the tables, threw up the window, climbed out, and was walking rapidly across the lawn before the young man could recover from his astonishment, but, a moment later, the sight of the baffled and infuriated old lord in the doorway gave a clue to the mystery.

Then ensued a scene which eclipsed that of the Friday night, and Durrant could only save Mechtilde from the indignity of being pursued by the servant by undertaking to follow her and fetch her back himself, which he accordingly did, waiting close to the chapel until she came out — after the service. She was a little surprised to see him, but he joined her quite naturally, and together they turned into the park.

'You had some trouble about getting to church,' he observed, after they had walked a little way in silence.

She nodded, and, meeting the compassionate glance of his grey eyes, her dignity and self-control suddenly collapsed, and she burst into tears.

'Poor child!' said Durrant. 'But what are you going to do? Things cannot continue like this.'

'Tell me, what must I do?' she pleaded.

'There is but one counsel to give,' he answered. 'You must conform, at least outwardly, to your father's religion.'

'No, no!' she cried at once. 'That would be very wrong. I cannot sell God's peace for that of men.'

'But what will become of you? Your father is stronger than you, and in time he will wear you out.'

'I will trust in God,' she said simply. 'Nothing can happen to me save what is His Will,' and at these words a strange light came into her face, causing her companion to wonder if an angel might visit the earth under the name of a woman.

On reaching the house, Mechtilde was summoned into her father's presence, who, if the actual violence of his wrath had abated, was in a cruel, unrelenting humour. He explained in a few

words that since she persisted in trying to practice the Catholic religion he meant to have her put under lock and key until her obstinacy was overcome, and, as she made no answer to this threat, he dismissed her, adding that the housekeeper would be given orders to immediately send away her Catholic maid.

Mechtilde went upstairs, but it was only when presently the key was turned in the door of her room that she grasped the meaning of the situation. Then followed a bitter sense of loneliness and helplessness, and throwing herself on the bed, she wept until pitiful sleep bore her back in its gentle arms to Kilmore.

So strong was the spell of 'Nature's soft nurse' that the entrance of a servant with some lunch did not break it, and it was late in the afternoon when Mechtilde returned once more to bitter reality.

One of the housemaids had been appointed her gaoler, and the sense of being, so to speak, under a servant's dominion hurt the girl's high-born pride and was more difficult not to resent than anything her father had yet done.

The day dragged on very wearily, too, for though she happened to have plenty of needlework to occupy her hands, there was nothing to occupy her thoughts, and she could not summon up courage to send her father a petition for some books. Often she wondered if James Durrant was still in the house, and therefore aware of her position, and whether he had pleaded for her. But, as a fact, the young man's visit had ended the day after Mechtilde was locked up.

More than a fortnight passed, and want of fresh air was causing the young girl to droop and refuse food, like a captive bird, when one morning an unexpected message came ordering her to be set at liberty.

She lunched alone in the big dining-room, and afterwards wandered out into the gardens. It has been said that in order to fully appreciate the value of freedom it is necessary to have tasted captivity, and Mechtilde certainly wondered if the grass had ever been so green, the sunshine so gay, or the bird-music so sweet as on this May afternoon.

By and bye she sat down on a garden bench, and, taking off her hat, let the light wind caress her forehead, and fell to thinking as was her wont, but soon was disturbed by the sound of footsteps on the gravel path, and saw with surprise James Durrant coming along, evidently seeking someone.

On catching sight of her he quickened his step, and she went forward to meet him.

After the first words of greeting, he explained that he had just arrived, and asked how she had been spending her time since their last meeting, which caused her to recount in her simple way about the solitary confinement, from which she had but just escaped, adding, as an involuntary expression of indignation rose to her lips:

'You must not blame my father; he must do what he thinks right, just as I must.'

Not being able to see the right of shutting up an innocent young girl, and allowing her neither fresh air nor companionship James Durrant answered nothing, but after a short pause he said:

'You are of "the stuff" of which martyrs are made, and I do not like to think you will be a martyr, Mechtilde. There is a way out of all these difficulties by which you shall have a pledge that the practice of your religion will never be interfered with.'

She was too unconscious to attach any significance to the fact that he had called her by her Christian name, but turning her lovely, eager, child-face towards him said:

'Tell me, what must I do to win this pledge?'

Taking her hands and looking down into her eyes, he answered by a question or rather by a petition:

'Mechtilde, will you be my wife?'

She sprang to her feet, wrenching herself free, and gasped, catching her breath between the words.

'Oh, no! I many not marry one who is—who is not a Catholic.'

'If that were all,' he replied, though startled in his turn by her manner, 'you can get a dispensation from your Church. I am ready to make all the required concessions.'

She shook her head.

'But it is never God's wish for a Catholic and Protestant to marry, and God has been so good to me in giving me true faith, I will do nothing except that which pleases Him most.' And she began to move away.

'Answer me one question, Mechtilde,' he said, getting in front of her. 'Do you dislike me?'

Then covering up her face she began to cry.

'Mechtilde, do you love me?'

Still no answer; she only shook from head to foot with the violence of her weeping.

Very gently he drew her hands away from her eyes, and, stooping, pressed a long kiss—as full of homage as of love—upon her forehead. With a moaning cry she turned and fled—terrified not of him but of her own heart.

CHAPTER V.

As soon as Lord Harlath had awakened out of the lethargy of grief on the death of his heir, a desire came upon him to give the vacant place in his hopes and ambitions to the son of his great friend by marrying the young man to his heiress, and he was consequently much gratified one morning (the morning before that on which Mechtilde's imprisonment ended) on receiving a letter from James Durrant, asking permission to pay his addresses to Mechtilde, and mentioning his desire to return immediately to Harlath for that purpose. Therefore it may be understood how disappointed the choleric old gentleman would be on learning that his pet-scheme was ruined by what he could view in no light save that of a girl's fanaticism.

On Durrant's departure he summoned Mechtilde to his presence, and flew into such a fearful rage that he appeared to quite lose his reason, and even descended to personal violence, seizing the girl