

The Storyteller

A WIFE'S REPENTANCE

'Roses, roses all the way': for it was summer at Rostrevor, with a haze of heat hanging over the tremulous radiance of meadows, and over the billowy sweep of hills, divided by the blue waters of the lough, whereon yachts lay at anchor, with here and there a boat slowly swinging to and fro with the lazy waves. A little way back from the road which winds from Rostrevor to Killowen was a pretty cottage, with a tangle of musk at its door, and a wilderness of frivolous poppies tossing gaudy heads at the flickering butterflies.

Slowly along its narrow path, and languidly as if exhausted by the heat, a young man walked, bearing the insignia of his profession, a sketch-book, under his arm. He was tall and pale; his cheeks had fallen away from dark, hollow eyes; his lips had a melancholy curve; his hands were thin and bloodless; and a sharp line, as of acute pain, divided his fine black brows. The cottage door being open, he entered with still reluctant step and many a backward glance at the exterior loveliness, which contrasted painfully enough with the interior disorder. He seemed suddenly to find himself in a region of 'penny novelettes' and unmended stockings, their monotony varied by an overturned vase of faded flowers, whence trickled a sluggish stream of green water; a soiled tablecloth was flung across one end of the table, which was further adorned with a can of sardines (a fork sticking in them), a stale loaf, a dusty dish of 'pitiful-hearted butter that melts at the sweet face of the sun.'

Gerald looked askance at this tempting lunch, and examined the cupboard, only to share the fate of Mother Hubbard, he shrugged his shoulders and walked out again. Hot and tired though he was, racked with headache and an unquenchable thirst, he preferred to be out of doors. There was little charm at home. Oh, the bitter irony of the word! He walked slowly on, his drooping shoulders telling of fatigue, and at length he flung himself on the grass at the roadside, gazing at the hills, which now seemed to be reeling away from him, now closing in.

Behind him, hidden by a golden mass of gorse and broom, a woman was sitting with a crumpled journal in her lap. She was young and pretty, but her fair hair, on which the sunshine laid a hand of light, was unkempt and disorderly; the lace on her print gown was carefully secured here and there with pins, and one shoe was tied with a bit of tape. Hearing footsteps, she noiselessly raised herself, surveyed her husband, frowned, and resumed her reading; whilst he, quite unconscious of her proximity, blessed God for sky and sea and air.

From Killowen a lady, young, beautiful, with a sunshade that seemed made of pink foam and a gown that expressed the last most dainty caprice of fashion, was strolling. As she passed Gerald she glanced at him—carelessly at first, then more intently—then stopped with a startled utterance of his name, and he sprang to his feet, both hands outstretched.

'Laura, Laura! Is it possible? My dear, dear Laura!'

The unseen watcher, peering out, beheld in either face a very rapture of amaze, delight, affection. Every word reached her strained and eager ears.

'To think of meeting you here!' said Laura, with an air of bewilderment.

'Oh, I am painting some local scenes for a Belfast merchant-prince! It seems much more wonderful that you should be here.'

'We are yachting—my husband and I,' she replied. 'We sailed into Carlingford the other night. We are now staying at Killowen.'

'I never heard of your marriage,' he said, with a faint sigh. 'I hope you are very happy?'

'As the day is long. He—my own especial he—is Colonel Desmond, of the Twenty-Fifth Hussars. You shall hear the whole romance another time. Just now I want to hear all about yourself. I have never seen you nor heard of you since your marriage five years ago. Gerald, I did try so hard to find you. I wrote, I advertised in vain. When I heard that you had been disinherited and sent away because of your marriage, I was most miserable. Why didn't you write to me, Gerald?'

'There were reasons,' he answered, with constraint. 'I was cut adrift from all my old associations, your way and mine were very far apart.'

'You are changed,' she said. 'I hope things have gone well with you?'

His face was white and set, he looked at the shining hilltops, and the secret listener caught her lip and held her breath for his reply.

'We have been very poor, Laura. My wife was an orphan, quite friendless and alone. I cultivated my one talent as best I could, and we got on fairly well for a time. Then our child died, and somehow my powers failed and my pictures didn't sell. I can tell you there are times when the world seems very empty.'

'You have your wife,' said Laura, softly (and the wife's face fell crimson on her hands), 'and you must have loved her very dearly to give up everything for her—home and friends and prospects. But you are looking very ill and worn. You were never fitted for "roughing it," dear. I think if he could see you now he would relent and be glad that he had you still to brighten his solitary old age.'

'I can not seek him, Laura. When baby died I wrote to him, crushing my pride for my sick wife's sake,

and he returned the letter without the smallest word of human sympathy. An only son might have some right to that—but—of course I married in direct opposition to his wishes, and should not murmur over the paying of the penalty.'

There was a troubled look in Laura's eyes, a nervous quiver in her voice that told of grave anxiety.

'You must come with us, Gerald, and bring your wife. Think of all the good the cruise would do you! And my husband has influence which he can and will use for you. I want to see your wife, to know her, to be kind to her if I may.'

A strange expression crossed Gerald's face. Was it fear or shame or what? Very reluctantly he told her where he lived, and again she gave him both hands.

'I shall call this evening, Gerald, then,' she said; and he turned to walk with her along the sunny road.

Gerald's wife, rising to her knees, strained her wild eyes after the graceful figure of the sweet-voiced woman.

'She might have been his wife, perhaps, but for me!' she muttered. 'And to think he gave up everything—home and father and friends—for me!'

Then she fell down and gave way to a fit of passionate sobbing, knowing in her inmost heart that she had been a drag upon him—a curse instead of a blessing to the man who had sacrificed all for her, whose way had seldom or never been brightened by helpful, encouraging words or wisely sympathy from her. Her reproaches and her constant complaints had been not the least of the burdens he had silently borne.

She went home pensively, shutting herself in the bedroom to bathe her tear-stained face. Her own dishevelled aspect, contrasted with the refined daintiness of Laura, struck painfully home to her. On the dressing-table lay a flask, round which her fingers closed convulsively, but with a blush she laid it down, and, shuddering, turned away. Her glance fell upon a small rosewood box, and, after a slight hesitation, she opened it. There were some flowers—funeral flowers from a wreath long withered—a little frock, and a tiny blue shoe down-trodden at the heel, much rubbed at the toe. Well, the restless little feet were quiet enough now!

It seemed that to Isabel that in one swift flash her whole life passed before her—all her lonely, neglected girlhood, into whose monotony Gerald had come like a star flashing into a dark sky; and she saw him as at first, the light-hearted young artist, the constant lover; then the quiet, saddened husband. But never until to-day had she known what his marriage had cost him; never before had she known that for love of her he had forfeited so much—for her, the unworthy! He had kept his sacrifice a secret; and, with shame and humiliation, she thought of her bitter reproaches for his inability speedily to achieve fame and fortune. She contrasted his steady work, his unchanging care for her, with her own slothfulness and neglect of him—and worse.

After the child's death she had been weak and low-spirited, and she had had recourse to stimulants instead of to prayer. The craving, once created, had grown upon her, and the frightful habit threatened to bind her body and soul; the most terrible blight was hovering over her youth and beauty, over brain and mind and will. But the ghost of her former self was before her side by side with his; and it seemed as if from the grave and the quiet, green earth to-day a little hand was stretched to save her from herself; as if those tiny fingers pointed to what had been, what was, and what still might be. The love of her girlhood, the graces of her courtship, reawakened in her heart; a whole tide of pain and remorse and fondness swept towards him who had stood between her and the unkind world, an angel of tender strength and protection; enduring with patience, forgiving with generosity; hoping all things, believing all things; and she clasped her hands in a very agony of prayer for help, for grace, for strength.

When she went in search of Gerald she found him lying on the couch in the dismal sitting-room. She saw with a pang the whiteness and sharpness of his features, the heaviness and hollowness of his eyes. Was her punishment to be a repentance come too late?

'Gerald, are you ill?'

'I don't feel very well, dear. Perhaps it is the heat. But you have been crying. What is the matter?'

She knelt beside him, her hand on his burning head.

'Gerald, I was out to-day, and I heard all that you said to "Laura." Neither of you saw me, and I saw and heard everything. Oh, I never knew that I was the cause of the estrangement between you and your father! I thought it was an old quarrel, and you never told me anything of your family and your home.'

'Why should I? I did not want you to think that my father was hard or unkind, or to tell you of his prejudice against you, whom he had never seen.'

'You never should have given up what you did for me: I am not worth it. Oh, why did you—why did you? I was, I am, utterly beneath you. Why didn't you tell that lady that I had been your curse, your greatest enemy? There was no reason why you should have spared me. She is willing to help you, and you must leave me and save yourself. You have lost enough already through me.'

'Do you really wish me to leave you, Isabel?'

The young wife shuddered, turned pale, and gasped forth:

'Yes!'

'And who will take care of you if I go away? No, Isabel: I shall stay with you and strive for you until death do us part.'

There was a pause, during which she wept bitterly—tears of a strange, shamed gladness.