

I've heard about your admiration for her—that is common town talk—though my informant on this point was Sir Francis Lennox."

"Sir Francis Lennox!" cried Philip, furiously. "Thank God! there's a man to deal with! By Heaven, I'll choke him with his own lie!"

Lady Winsleigh raised her eyebrows in well-bred surprise. "Dear me! It *is* a lie, then? Now, I should have thought from all accounts that it was so very likely to be true!"

Philip turned white with passion. Her sarcastic smile, her mocking glance, irritated him almost beyond endurance.

"Permit me to ask you, Clara," continued Lord Winsleigh, calmly, "if you—as you say, know nothing about Violet Vere, why did you go to the Brilliant Theater yesterday morning?"

She flashed an angry glance at him.

"Why? To secure a box for the new performance. Is there anything wonderful in that?"

Her husband remained unmoved. "May I see the voucher for this box?" he inquired.

"I've sent it to some friends," replied her ladyship, haughtily. "Since when have you decided to become an inquisitor, my lord?"

"Lady Winsleigh," said Philip, suddenly and eagerly, "will you swear to me that you have said or done nothing to make my Thelma leave me?"

"Oh, she *has* left you, has she?" and Lady Clara smiled maliciously. "I thought she would! Why don't you ask your dear friend, George Lorimer, about her? He is madly in love with her, as everybody knows—she is probably the same with him!"

"Clara, Clara!" exclaimed Lord Winsleigh in accents of deep reproach. "Shame on you! Shame!"

Her ladyship laughed amusedly. "Please don't be tragic!" she said; "it's too ridiculous! Sir Philip has only himself to blame. Of course, Thelma knows about his frequent visits to the Brilliant Theater. I told her all that Sir Francis said. Why should she be kept in the dark? I dare say she doesn't mind—she's very fond of Mr. Lorimer!"

Errington felt as though he must choke with fury. He forgot the presence of Lord Winsleigh—he forgot everything but his just indignation.

"My God!" he cried, passionately. "You *dare* to speak so—you!"

"Yes, I!" she returned coolly, measuring him with a glance, "I dare! What have you to say against *me*?" She drew herself up imperiously.

Then turning to her husband, she said: "Have the goodness to take your excited friend away, my lord! I am going out—I have a great many engagements this morning, and I really cannot stop

to discuss this absurd affair any longer! It isn't my fault that Sir Philip's excessive admiration for Miss Vere has become the subject of gossip. I don't blame him for it! He seems extremely ill-tempered about it; but, after all, '*ce nest que la vérité qui blesse!*'"

And she smiled maliciously.

CHAPTER XI.

For my mother's sake,
For thine and hers, O Love! I pity take
On all poor women. Jesu's will be done,
Honor for all, and infamy for none,
This side the borders of the burning lake.

ERIC MACKAY'S *Love-letters of a Violinist.*

LORD WINSLEIGH did not move. Sir Philip fixed his eyes upon her in silence. Some occult fascination forced her to meet his glance, and the utter scorn of it stung her proud heart to its center. Not that she felt much compunction—her whole soul was up in arms against him, and had been so from the very day she was first told of his unexpected marriage. His evident contempt now irritated her; she was angrier with him than ever, and yet she had a sort of strange triumph in the petty vengeance she had designed; she had destroyed his happiness, for a time, at least. If she could but shake his belief in his wife! she thought, vindictively. To that end she had thrown out her evil hint respecting Thelma's affection for George Lorimer, but the shaft had been aimed uselessly. Errington knew too well the stainless purity of Thelma to wrong her by the smallest doubt, and he would have staked his life on the loyalty of his friend. Presently he controlled his anger sufficiently to be able to speak, and still eying her with that straight, keen look of immeasurable disdain, he said in cold, deliberate accents:

"Your ladyship is in error—the actress in question is the wife of my secretary, Mr. Neville. For years they have been estranged. My visits to her were entirely on Neville's behalf—my letters to her were all on the same subject. Sir Francis Lennox must have known the truth all along—Violet Vere has been his mistress for the past five years!"

He uttered the concluding words with intense bitterness. A strange bewildered horror passed over Lady Winsleigh's face.

"I don't believe it," she said, rather faintly.

"Believe it or not, it is true!" he replied, curtly. "Ask the manager of the Brilliant, if you doubt me. Winsleigh, it's no use my stopping here any longer. As her ladyship refuses to give any explanation—"

"Wait a moment, Errington," interposed Lord Winsleigh, in his coldest and most methodical manner. "Her ladyship refuses—but I do not refuse! Her ladyship will not speak—she allows her husband to speak for her. Therefore," and he smiled at his aston-

ished wife somewhat sardonically, "I may tell you at once that her ladyship admits to having purchased from Violet Vere for the sum of twenty pounds the letter which she afterward took with her own hands to your wife." Lady Winsleigh uttered an angry exclamation. "Don't interrupt me, Clara, if you please," he said, with an icy smile. "We have so many sympathies in common that I'm sure I shall be able to explain your unspoken meanings quite clearly." He went on, addressing himself to Errington, who stood utterly amazed. "Her ladyship desires me to assure you that her only excuse for her action in this matter, is, that she fully believed the reports her friend, Sir Francis Lennox, gave her concerning your supposed intimacy with the actress in question—and that, believing it, she made use of it as much as possible for the purpose of destroying your wife's peace of mind and confidence in you. Her object was most purely feminine—love of mischief, and the gratification of private spite! There's nothing like frankness!" and Lord Winsleigh's face was a positive study as he spoke. "You see"—he made a slight gesture toward his wife, who stood speechless, and so pale that her very lips were colorless—"her ladyship is not in a position to deny what I have said. Excuse her silence!"

And again he smiled—that smile as glitteringly chill as a gleam of light on the edge of a sword. Lady Winsleigh raised her head, and her eyes met his with a dark expression of the uttermost anger.

"Spy!" she hissed between her teeth—then without further word or gesture, she swept haughtily away into her dressing-room, which adjoined the boudoir, and closed the door of communication, thus leaving the two men alone together.

Errington felt himself to be in a most painful and awkward position. If there was anything he more than disliked, it was a *scene*—particularly of a domestic nature. And he had just had a glimpse into Lord and Lady Winsleigh's married life, which to him was decidedly unpleasant. He could not understand how Lord Winsleigh had become cognizant of all he had so frankly stated—and then, why had he not told him everything at first, without waiting to declare it in his wife's presence? Unless, indeed, he wished to shame her. There was evidently something in the man's disposition and character that he, Philip, could not as yet comprehend—something that certainly puzzled him, and filled him with vague uneasiness.

"Winsleigh, I'm awfully sorry this has happened," he began hurriedly, holding out his hand.

Lord Winsleigh grasped it cordially. "My dear fellow, so am I! Heartily sorry! I have to be sorry for a good many things rather often. But I'm specially grieved to think that your beautiful and innocent young wife is the victim in this case. Unfortunately, I was told nothing till this morning, otherwise I might pos-

sibly have prevented all your unhappiness. But I trust it won't be of long duration. Here's this letter," he returned it as he spoke, "which in more than one way has cost so large a price. Possibly her ladyship may now regret her ill-gotten purchase."

"Pardon me," said Errington, curiously, "but how did you know?"

"The information was pressed upon me very much," replied Lord Winsleigh, evasively, "and from such a source that up to the last moment I almost refused to believe it." He paused, and then went on with a forced smile: "Suppose we don't talk any more about it, Errington? The subject's rather painful to me. Only allow me to ask your pardon for my wife's share in the mischief!"

Something in his manner of speaking affected Sir Philip.

"Upon my soul, Winsleigh," he exclaimed, with sudden fervor, "I fancy you're a man greatly wronged!"

Lord Winsleigh smiled slightly. "You only *fancy*?" he said, quietly. "Well—my good friend, we all have our troubles—I dare say mine are no greater than those of many better men." He stopped short, then asked, abruptly: "I suppose you'll see Lennox?"

Errington set his teeth hard. "I shall—at once!" he replied. "And I shall probably thrash him within an inch of his life!"

"That's right! I sha'n't be sorry!" and Lord Winsleigh's hand clinched almost unconsciously. "I hope you understand, Errington, that if it hadn't been for my son, I should have shot that fellow long ago. I dare say you wonder, and some others, too, why I haven't done it. But Ernest—poor little chap!—he would have heard of it—and the reason of it—his young life is involved in mine—why should I bequeath him a dishonored mother's name? There—for Heaven's sake, don't let me make a fool of myself!" and he fiercely dashed his hand across his eyes. "A duel or a divorce, or a horse-whipping—they all come to pretty much the same thing—all involve public scandal for the name of the woman who may be unhappily concerned—and scandal clings, like the stain on Lady Macbeth's hand. In your case you can act—*your* wife is above a shadow of suspicion—but I—oh, my God! how much women have to answer for in the miseries of this world!"

Errington said nothing. Pity and respect for the man before him held him silent. He was one of the martyrs of modern social life—a man who evidently knew himself to be dishonored by his wife—and who yet, for the sake of his son, submitted to be daily broken on the wheel of private torture rather than let the boy grow up to despise and slight his mother. Whether he were judged as wise or weak in his behavior there was surely something noble about him—something unselfish and heroic that deserved recognition. Presently Lord Winsleigh continued in calmer tones:

"I've been talking too much about myself, Errington, I fear—forgive it! Sometimes I've thought you misunderstood me——"

"I never shall again!" declared Philip, earnestly.

Lord Winsleigh met his look of sympathy with one of gratitude.

"Thanks!" he said, briefly; and with this they shook hands again heartily, and parted. Lord Winsleigh saw his visitor to the door—and then at once returned to his wife's apartments. She was still absent from the boudoir—he therefore entered her dressing-room without ceremony.

There he found her—alone, kneeling on the floor, her head buried in an arm-chair—and her whole frame shaken with convulsive sobs. He looked down upon her with a strange, wistful pain in his eyes—pain mingled with compassion.

"Clara!" he said, gently. She started and sprung up—confronting him with flushed cheeks and wet eyes.

"You here?" she exclaimed, angrily. "I wonder you dare to——" she broke off, confused by his keen, direct glance.

"It is a matter for wonder," he said, quietly. "It's the strangest thing in the world that I—your husband—should venture to intrude myself into your presence! Nothing could be more out of the common. But I have something to say to you—something which must be said sooner or later—and I may as well speak now."

He paused—she was silent, looking at him in a sort of sudden fear.

"Sit down," he continued in the same even tones. "You must have a little patience with me—I'll endeavor to be as brief as possible."

Mechanically she obeyed him and sank into a low *fauteuil*. She began playing with the trinkets on her silver chatelaine, and endeavored to feign the most absolute unconcern, but her heart beat quickly—she could not imagine what was coming next—her husband's manner and tone were quite new to her.

"You accused me just now," he went on, "of being a spy. I have never condescended to act such a part toward you, Clara. When I first married you I trusted you with my life, my honor, and my name, and though you have betrayed all three"—she moved restlessly as his calm gaze remained fixed on her—"I repeat—though you have betrayed all three, I have deliberately shut my eyes to the ruin of my hopes, in a loyal endeavor to shield you from the world's calumny. Regarding the unhappiness you have caused the Erringtons—your own maid Louise Renaud (who has given you notice of her intention to leave you) told me all she knew of your share in what I may call positive cruelty toward a happy and innocent woman who has never injured you, and whose friend you declared yourself to be——"

"You believe the lies of a servant?" suddenly cried Lady Winsleigh, wrathfully.

"Have not *you* believed the lies of Sir Francis Lennox, who is less honest than a servant?" asked her husband, his grave voice deepening with a thrill of passion. "And haven't you reported them everywhere as truths? But as regards your maid—I doubted her story altogether. She assured me she knew what money you took out with you yesterday, and what you returned with—and as the only place you visited in the morning was the Brilliant Theater—after having received a telegram from Lennox, which she saw—it was easy for her to put two and two together, especially as she noticed you reading the letter you had purchased; moreover"—he paused—"she has heard certain conversations between you and Sir Francis, notably one that took place at the garden-party in summer at Errington Manor. Spy, you say? your detective has been paid by you—fed and kept about your own person—to minister to your vanity and to flatter your pride—that she has turned informer against you is not surprising. Be thankful that her information has fallen into no more malignant hands than mine!"

Again he paused—she was still silent—but her lips trembled nervously.

"And yet I was loath to believe everything," he resumed, half sadly—"till Errington came and showed me that letter and told me the whole story of his misery. Even then I thought I would give you one more chance—that's why I brought him to you and asked you the question before him. One look at your face told me you were guilty, though you denied it. I should have been better pleased had you confessed it! But why talk about it any longer?—the mischief is done—I trust it is not irreparable. I certainly consider that before troubling that poor girl's happiness you should have taken the precaution to inquire a little further into the truth of the reports you heard from Sir Francis Lennox—he is not a reliable authority on any question whatsoever. You may have thought him so"—he stopped short and regarded her with sorrowful sternness—"I say, Clara, you may have thought him so, once—but *now*? Are you proud to have shared his affections with—Violet Vere?"

She uttered a sharp cry and covered her face with her hands—an action which appeared to smite her husband to the heart—for his voice trembled with deep feeling when he next spoke.

"Ah, best hide it, Clara!" he said, passionately. "Hide that fair face I loved so well—hide those eyes in which I dreamed of finding my life's sunshine! Clara, Clara! What can I say to you, fallen rose of womanhood? How can I"—he suddenly bent over her as though to caress her, then drew back with a quick, agonized sigh. "You thought me blind, Clara?" he went on in low tones, "blind to my own dishonor—blind to your faithlessness. I tell you if you had taken my heart between your hands and wrung

the blood out of it drop by drop I could not have suffered more than I have done! Why have I been silent so long?—no matter why—but *now*, now, Clara—this life of ours must end!”

She shuddered away from him.

“End it then!” she muttered in a choked voice. “You can do as you like—you can divorce me.”

“Yes,” said Lord Winsleigh, musingly, “I can divorce you! There will be no defense possible—as you know. If witnesses are needed, they are to be had in the persons of our own domestics. The co-respondent in the case will not refute the charge against him—and I, the plaintiff, *must* win my just cause. Do you realize it all, Clara? You, the well-known leader of a large social circle—you, the proud beauty and envied lady of rank and fashion—you will be made a subject for the coarse jests of lawyers—the very judge on the bench will probably play off his stale witticisms at your expense—your dearest friends will tear your name to shreds—the newspapers will reek of your doings—and honest house-maids, reading of your fall from your high estate, will thank God that their souls and bodies are more chaste than yours! And last, not least, think when old age creeps on and your beauty withers, think of your son grown to manhood—the sole heir to my name—think of him as having but one thing to blush for—the memory of his dishonored mother!”

“Cruel—cruel!” she cried, endeavoring to check her sobs, and withdrawing her hands from her face. “Why do you say such things to me? Why did you marry me?”

He caught her hands and held them in a fast grip.

“Why? Because I loved you, Clara—loved you with all the tenderness of a strong man’s heart! When I first saw you, you seemed to be the very incarnation of maiden purity and loveliness! The days of our courtship—the first few months of our marriage—what they were to you, I know not—to me they were supreme happiness. When our boy was born, my adoration, my reverence for you increased—you were so sacred in my eyes that I could have knelt and asked a benediction from these little hands”—here he gently loosened them from his clasp. “Then came the change—*what* changed you, I cannot imagine—it has always seemed to me unnatural, monstrous, incredible! There was no falling away in *my* affection, that I can swear! My curse upon the man who turned your heart from mine! So rightful and deep a curse is it that I feel it must some day strike home.” He paused and seemed to reflect. “Who is there more vile, more traitorous than he?” he went on. “Has he not tried to influence Errington’s wife against her husband? For what base purpose? But, Clara, he is powerless against *her* purity and innocence; what, in the name of God, gave him power over *you*?”

She drooped her head, and the hot blood rushed to her face.

“You’ve said enough!” she murmured, sullenly. “If you have decided on a divorce, pray carry out your intention with the least possible delay. I cannot talk any more! I—I am tired!”

“Clara,” said her husband, solemnly, with a strange light in his eyes, “I would rather kill you than divorce you!”

There was something so terribly earnest in his tone that her heart beat fast with fear.

“Kill me?—kill me?” she gasped with white lips.

“Yes!” he repeated, “kill you—as a Frenchman or an Italian would—and take the consequences. Yes—though an Englishman, I would rather do this than drag your frail poor womanhood through the mire of public scandal! I have, perhaps, a strange nature, but such as I am, I am. There are too many of our high-born families already flaunting their immorality and low licentiousness in the face of the mocking, grinning populace. I for one could never make up my mind to fling the honor of my son’s mother to them, as though it were a bone for dogs to fight over. No—I have another proposition to make to you—” He stopped short. She stared at him wonderingly. He resumed in methodical, unmoved, business-like tones: “I propose, Clara, simply—to leave you! I’ll take the boy and absent myself from this country, so as to give you perfect freedom and save you all trouble. There’ll be no possibility for scandal, for I will keep you cognizant of my movements, and should you require my presence at any time for the sake of appearances, or to shield you from calumny, you may rely on my returning to you at once, without delay. Ernest will gain many advantages by travel—his education is quite a sufficient motive for my departure, my interest in his young life being well known to all our circle. Moreover, with me—under my surveillance—he need never know anything against—against you. I have always taught him to honor and obey you in his heart.” Lord Winsleigh paused a moment—then went on somewhat musingly: “When he was quite little, he used to wonder why you didn’t love him—it was hard for me to hear him say that, sometimes. But I always told him that you did love him—but that you had so many visits to make and so many friends to entertain that you had no time to play with him. I don’t think he quite understood—but still I did my best!” He was silent. She had hidden her face again in her hands, and he heard a sound of smothered sobbing. “I think,” he continued, calmly, “that he has a great reverence for you in his young heart—a feeling which partakes, perhaps, more of fear than love—still it is better than—disdain—or—or disrespect. I shall always teach him to esteem you highly—but I think, as matters stand—if I relieve you of all your responsibilities to husband and son—you—Clara!—pray don’t distress yourself—there’s no occasion for this, Clara!”

For on a sudden impulse she had flung herself at his feet in an irrepressible storm of passionate weeping.

"Kill me, Harry!" she sobbed, wildly, clinging to him. "Kill me! don't speak to me like this!—don't leave me! Oh, my God! don't, don't despise me so utterly! Hate me—curse me—strike me—do anything, but don't leave me as if I were some low thing, unfit for your touch—I know I am, but oh, Harry—!" She clung to him more closely. "If you leave me I will not live—I cannot! Have you no pity? Why would you throw me back alone—all, all alone, to die of your contempt and my shame!"

And she bowed her head in an agony of tears.

He looked down upon her for a moment in silence.

"Your shame!" he murmured. "My wife—"

Then he raised her in his arms and drew her with a strange hesitation of touch to his breast, as though she were some sick or wounded child, and watched her as she lay there weeping, her face hidden, her whole frame trembling in his embrace.

She raised herself in his arms and looked at him piteously.

"Won't you give me a chance?" she sobbed. "Not one? If I had but known you better—if I had understood—oh, I've been vile, wicked, deceitful—but I'm not happy, Harry—I've never been happy since I wronged you! Won't you give me one little hope that I may win your love again—no, not your love—but your pity? Oh, Harry, have I lost all—all—"

Her voice broke—she could say no more.

He stroked her hair gently. "You speak on impulse just now, Clara," he said gravely yet tenderly. "You can't know your own strength or weakness. God forbid that I should judge you harshly! As you wish it, I will not leave you yet. I'll wait. Whether we part or remain together shall be decided by your own actions, your own looks, your own words. You understand, Clara? You know my feelings. I'm content for the present to place my fate in your hands." He smiled rather sadly. "But for love, Clara, I fear nothing can be done to warm to life this poor perished love of ours. We can, perhaps, take hands and watch its corpse patiently together and say, how sorry we are it is dead—such penitence comes always too late!"

He sighed, and put her gently away from him.

She turned up her flushed, tear-stained face to his.

"Will you kiss me, Harry?" she asked, tremblingly.

He met her eyes, and an exclamation that was almost a groan broke from his lips. A shudder passed through his frame.

"I can't, Clara! I can't! God forgive me! Not yet!" And with that he bowed his head and left her.

She listened to the echo of his firm footsteps dying away, and creeping guiltily to a side door she opened it, and watched yearningly his retreating figure till it had disappeared.

"Why did I never love him till now?" she murmured, sobbingly. "Now, when he despises me—when he will not even kiss me?"

She leaned against the half-open door in an attitude of utter dejection, not caring to move, listening intently with a vague hope of hearing her husband's returning tread. A lighter step than his, however, came suddenly along from the other side of the passage and startled her a little—it was Ernest, looking the picture of boyish health and beauty. He was just going out for his usual ride—he lifted his cap with pretty courtesy as he saw her, and said:

"Good-morning, mother!"

She looked at him with new interest—how handsome the lad was!—how fresh his face!—how joyously clear those bright blue eyes of his! He, on his part, was moved by a novel sensation too—his mother—his proud, beautiful, careless mother had been crying—he saw that at a glance, and his young heart beat faster when she laid her white hand, sparkling all over with rings, on his arm and drew him closer to her.

"Are you going to the park?" she asked, gently.

"Yes." Then recollecting his training in politeness and obedience, he added instantly: "Unless you want me."

She smiled faintly. "I never do want you—do I, Ernest?" she asked, half sadly. "I never want my boy at all." Her voice quivered—and Ernest grew more and more astonished.

"If you do, I'll stay," he said stoutly, filled with a chivalrous desire to console this so suddenly tender mother of his, whatever her griefs might be. Her eyes filled again, but she tried to laugh.

"No, dear, not now; run along and enjoy yourself. Come to me when you return—I shall be at home all day. And—stop! Ernest—won't you kiss me?"

The boy opened his eyes wide in respectful wonderment, and his cheeks flushed with surprise and pleasure.

"Why, mother—of course!" And his fresh, sweet lips closed on hers with a frank and unaffected heartiness. She held him fast for a moment and looked at him earnestly.

"Tell your father you kissed me—will you?" she said. "Don't forget!"

And with that she waved her hand to him, and retreated again into her own apartment. The boy went on his way somewhat puzzled and bewildered. Did his mother love him, after all? If so, he thought—how glad he was!—how very glad! and what a pity he had not known it before!

CHAPTER XII.

I heed not custom, creed, nor law;
I care for nothing that ever I saw—
I terribly laugh with an oath and sneer,
When I think that the hour of Death draws near!

W. WINTER.

ERRINGTON'S first idea, on leaving Winsleigh House, was to seek an interview with Sir Francis Lennox, and demand an explanation.