

MAUD ANNESLEY.

A TALE OF LOVE AND JEALOUSY AND A TEMPTATION.

The close of a golden day at Sorrento.

Maud Annesley stood in the garden of Tasso's villa, which, as the traveler knows, is perched like a sea-bird on the summit of the tall cliffs and looked out across the sunlit waters, where the fishing boats showed their heads and tails, as a fairy barge reared on the shining waves.

A lovely girl, Miss Maud Annesley, with a face as once tender, sensitive and proud, with marvellous brown eyes and sunny-brown hair, with grace in every movement, with perfect hands and feet, and in point of character, as capricious, spoiled and uncertain as her companions alone can be yet still remain bewitching. As full of good qualities as she was of faults, a bundle of inconsistencies so opposite that she sometimes herself said, laughingly, she wondered that she held together.

There she stood, leaning her arms on the railing and gazing down the dizzy height where the gulls circled to and fro, while she looked wistfully over at the purple island, and was haunted by a sudden, foolish fancy that it seemed like the land of the lotus-eaters, where she might sit down and rest forever, could she only reach his happy shore. She had been spending a gay day with a gay party. She had been the centre and chief attraction for all the men. She had been in the wildest spirits and was handsomer than ever. And now she stood there in the sunset and sighed and looked dreamy and pre-occupied, as if care and trouble had come to her at last.

Howard Crofton, grave and sedate as befitted his nine and twenty years, strolled idly up upon the villa terrace, and saw her standing there in the magic light, and called her hard names and himself a fool, which no doubt he was, so far as concerned her, sensible as he usually proved himself in other respects.

It was the second week in June. For a whole month Crofton had been living in a blessed dream; and now that it was rudely disturbed he felt himself an aggrieved individual, as, indeed, I think he had a right to think himself.

He had come to Sorrento, meaning to remain for a few days and then go back to Naples, and drift away northward; but he found Maud Annesley and a pleasant party, and here he was still. He had known Maud's aunt long before, when he was a mere boy, and she received him like an old friend, for his mother's sake; and she introduced, he and Maud had naturally glided into a rapid and agreeable intimacy. Censorious people called Maud's mild manners with men flirting of an outrageous sort; but she was gentler and less capricious with Crofton than her aunt had ever seen her with any man, but, like a wise woman, the elder lady held her peace.

Just a week before this day Crofton's cousin and her spouse appeared, a cousin like most people's given to interference and governing; and of all the girls that lived, Mrs. Grosvenor hated Maud Annesley the worst. She disliked girls in general, as women often do who have been beauties and have since grown thin and skinny and yellow; but she detested Maud. They had met in Paris two years previous, and Maud had laughed at her airs and graces, and Mrs. Grosvenor had been obliged to play second to this brilliant creature, who seemed to fascinate men at will. So she took refuge in hating the girl, and perhaps found a kind of consolation therein.

Soon afterwards the San Arpino came down from Naples and took possession of their villa; and, to the disgust of the stately old dowager, young San Arpino, the heir to a dukedom and a rent-roll enormous for Italy, and one of the handsomest men the peninsula could boast, flung himself anew straight at Maud Annesley's heart, or head, or feet, as you please. He had done this the previous winter in Rome, much to the disgust of his stately mother, the Duchessa. Maud had, it is true, been the most admired girl there. But she had not a large fortune, and, even if she had, the San Arpino, for a wonder, would not have needed her wealth. They had enough of their own, and more. They were proud. They boasted of two sustained titles, and a descent, which they traced back almost to Nero, or to Romulus himself, for what I know.

From the moment that San Arpino appeared Maud Annesley had completely changed in her conduct towards Crofton. There had been no letting him down easily; no attempt at pretence. She turned haughty and insolent and stony, and was never so charming and womanly to San Arpino as when Crofton was by to see. And this was the creature whom he had loved, had believed in; before whom he had poured his heart and soul, and let her know that he had done so! He had never put his secret into words, but he knew that she had seen it clearly enough, and had given him the tacit encouragement which any woman can do when she pleases, and yet remain perfectly feminine and delicate. False and despicable she proved in every way, and he had loved her! He loved her still, in spite of his pain and wrath. He learned the whole truth from his cousin, heard the story of the past winter, heard of San Arpino's devotion. Maud's efforts to win a ducal coronet and the old dowager's rage and mastery diplomacy to prevent such a consummation. He, Crofton, had been flattered with from sheer wantonness, or else regarded as a *pis aller*. Maud afterwards had thought of liking him and his fortune, because she believed the young Duke out of her reach. But the instant the Neapolitan reappeared and proved that his devotion was as strong as ever, strong enough to make him rebel against the mother who had always ruled him imperiously, then Maud flung off the mask and let Crofton see her in her true colors.

He was going on the morrow. The torture of the last five days had grown insupportable. Besides, now there was no longer any doubt in his mind, it would be weak and contemptible to remain, a laughing-stock for all about—and worse, an object of scorn to himself.

He had been horribly treated, and his sense of justice revolted against this. He was a man slow to anger, but he was furious now. Had the girl shown the least consideration for his feelings he could have made excuses for her. He knew she did not love this handsome boy, who was only her own age; but she might be dazzled by his position, she might be urged on by her aunt. Crofton could have sought for reasons why he should not judge her

harshly had her conduct afforded the least opportunity. But she turned upon him with absolute cruelty; she seemed to have a savage pleasure in rendering the blow as cruel as possible, in hurting him in every way that female ingenuity can contrive. To-day they had all been on an excursion, up among the lovely Sorrento hills. Crofton could not remain behind, for fear this girl should think he lacked courage to support her heartless cruelty, and she had made such a day for him that he thought a soul in purgatory might pity him.

So now he was going away. As he stood on the terrace and he caught sight of her standing below him, in her matchless beauty, a wild desire crossed his mind to speak, to let all his misery and anger find vent. She deserved it, deserved to hear the verdict of a true, upright heart, which her treachery had lacerated. He did not stop to consider. He was too nearly mad to be hindered by scruples or ideas which would have influenced him at another time.

He strode down the steps, hurried through the garden, and came upon her before she was aware of his presence. The least addition of color rushed into her cheeks, a second's confusion into her eyes, as she turned and perceived him. But both signs disappeared so quickly that he almost fancied they had not been there. She looked a little wearied, bored by this intrusion, but she gave him a sweet smile more cruel than a dagger thrust, and said, indolently, "How can you have energy enough left, after the day's fatigues, to move when you might sit still?"

"You seem to share a portion of it," he answered, trying to imitate her indifference. "Oh, I came out to get rid of the people," she replied. "One might as well be an animal in a menagerie, one never gets a moment to oneself."

"Probably I disturb you then," said he. "I am too well brought up a young person to contradict my elders," she replied, laughingly. "Still, truth now and then makes an agreeable variety in this world, even if not polite," he retorted, losing his ill-assumed indifference. "I think you are misanthropic or cross," said she. "I dislike either mood, so I will leave you."

He stood straight in her path, and fixed his eyes on her with a look of such iron determination that she remained motionless. "It is possible that what I have to say may not be agreeable," returned he, slowly; "but I mean to say it, all the same. I am going away to-morrow."

"Does that come under the head of disagreeable truths?" she interrupted, with a little shrug of her shoulders. "Not to you, certainly, or to me," he answered. "So much the better; then bon voyage!" "But, before I go, there is something I wish to say."

"Last words are so fatiguing," she murmured. "I beg your pardon; but you spoke just as the dying people in novels begin their confessions. I forgot it was only a journey you were looking forward to."

"If I were dying," he cried out passionately, "you and I could not be separating more irrevocably."

"Partings are hard things," sighed she. "There's only one thing worse as a rule—meeting people again."

"You know," he hurried on, "that my devotion was not the idle homage a man pays a beautiful woman. You knew that my whole heart had gone out towards you, and tacitly you accepted it. You did a very wicked thing! I have no hesitation in acknowledging my weakness. I honor myself that I could love any human being as truly and unselfishly as I did you. That I was deceived is no shame to me."

The pallor and softness left her face. The beautiful features looked hard, as if carved out of marble.

"Don't stop!" she cried. "You had more to say—finish it!"

"Only to compliment you on your skill and art. It amused you to attempt a sort of Lady Clara Vere de Vere play with an honest heart. You succeeded perfectly. If that knowledge be any triumph to you, take it."

"Is it worth while?" she retorted, as if considering whether to accept success which was of such slight value.

"You do not deny the truth of what I have said. You cannot!" he exclaimed. "In any case, I would not," she cried; and now she confronted him with a face shaken by anger. "If one word would clear me in your estimation, I'd not speak it. No, not if my soul's safety depended on its utterance. Believe what you will. It is a matter of indifference to me! Your respect would not be worth the having. You have been rude—insolent. I will never forgive you! Never!"

"It is a little odd to hear you put the right to pardon on your side," he answered, trying to speak calmly, since she had flamed into such passionate wrath. "To deny would be so useless that it is wise not to make the attempt."

"Go on! Do go on! I want to hear you speak your whole mind out. I would not stop you for the world," she said, with a bitter laugh.

"I have nothing more to say. I will congratulate you, if you like, on winning a coronet. It is the true English girl's ambition!" he sneered.

"He knows us so well!" she cried, laughing again in the same low, mirthless fashion. "Did you love him? I could excuse your treatment of me. Love is always an excuse. But you do not. You love nobody but yourself. If any higher rank were within your reach, you would fling this boy aside as unhesitatingly as you have flung me."

"Yes. I love nobody but myself," she exclaimed. "You are right there!" "And boast of it?"

She turned and walked away without another word. He made no attempt to follow—why should he? They had nothing more to say to one another in this world. He had only one prayer to offer, where she was concerned—it was that even in the next he might be preserved from the sight of her.

He waited till the had crossed the terrace, and disappeared into the house; then he hurried off through the lane-like streets, past the little square, where the villagers were collected, as usual, at that hour, and so up the path which runs along the ravine towards the hills above. The sun set in a blaze of glory. The sea shone like the pavement of the city the Prophet saw in his vision. It deepened from opal tints to amethyst, then grew dark and mysterious. The moon came up and trailed a pathway of golden light across the billows which seemed to lead away into heaven.

The hills loomed shadowy and black. The pale glory of the evening sky domed in the whole. The soft murmur of the brook sounded through the stillness, as if calling to the sea; and the sea answered, as if to the brook, in its converse. A single nightingale awoke in the orange grove and sang his heart out in a passionate plaint. The faint breeze brought, ever anon, the sound of laughing voices from the old square, where the villagers still gossiped. All was quiet and peaceful, save in his heart, where the tempest raged with awful might.

It was late when Crofton returned to the Tasso, but he was not able to get up to his rooms in safety. There were laughter and music in the salons and gay groups standing about the long corridors. Of course, he was captured, and forced to talk and laugh and behave like ordinary mortals under the galling restraints of civilization.

Crofton had told his old owl of a cousin of his proposed departure. He was glad to escape her society, for he had grown almost to hate to detest her, with her head-shaking, her Cassandra prophecies, and now her "I told you so's" expressed in words and looks. Naturally, by the time he reached the house, everybody knew he intended to go away, and they were all eager to detain him. A portion of the party was to set off in the morning on an expedition to Amalfi. The others were going to row over to Capri and spend the day there. Crofton could not escape staying for one excursion or the other, for he was still animated by the natural desire to keep his hurt a secret. He chose Capri, however, when he heard that Maud Annesley was to make one of the Amalfi party.

While all the talk and merriment went on he could see this Maud Annesley through the open windows. She stood out on the terrace, with the full moonlight glorifying her face, as she talked and listened to young San Arpino, who had escaped from his dowager mother, and came to the hotel as usual.

Down in the gardens below, an Italian boy began playing Neapolitan sea-songs on his guitar. Half a dozen people called at one upon Maud to sing. Without hesitation she complied, and her rich contralto voice floated into the rooms, unthinkingly in its sweetness, and struck Crofton's very soul. He could stand it no more; so he cast one other look out into the glory of the night, and saw her standing there in her beauty, while the young Italian Duke gazed into her face with passionate devotion he made no effort to conceal. Then Crofton passed from the rooms, hoping that he had hidden Maud Annesley farewell forever.

The night he spent was tragic enough. But in this prosaic world tragedies more frequently meet with an anti-climax than a consummation, and Crofton's experience was the usual one.

He was late in appearing the next morning, rather hoping that the pleasure seekers might have forgot him and gone off. But when one wants forgetfulness people always remember one. Up came a servant to say that everybody had gone down to the shore, but he was waited for there, and must come.

So off he set, cursing acquaintances and expeditions in his heart, as all of us have so often done when wearied and wounded, and yet forced to meet the petty exigencies of life with a smiling front. His cousin, Mrs. Grosvenor, had sent him word that she was too miserable with her neuralgia to join the party. There was a slight consolation in that. He should at least be free from her questions and surmises, her sighs and corkscrew glances, always trying to worm his secret out of him, she being one of those people who enjoyed groaning over the misfortunes of the persons she liked.

Crofton reached the shelving shore that spreads below the rocky descent from the village. Two boats, with bright-colored awnings, were ready. Into the smaller of the two San Arpino was assisting Maud Annesley just as Crofton appeared. In his dizziness and the uncertain state of his faculties on the previous evening, he had misunderstood, and so had chosen the very expedition of which she was to make a member.

Most of the wild young ones had gone to Amalfi. The boat in which Crofton seated himself held staid elders. Maud's aunt among them, with whom Crofton was a favorite. But she looked grave and rather harassed this morning, and was less cordial to him than her wont. The boat in which Miss Annesley and San Arpino, with a few other youthful people were seated, took the lead; and as he sat in the row, Crofton could hear her gay laugh ring out across the waters, but he did not once turn his head. She had seen him as he descended the shore; their eyes had met. Then she had turned quickly away. Some words from the aunt made Crofton comprehend that neither she nor Maud had understood he was to make one of the party.

Beautiful rock-bound Capri! How one would like to dwell on its loveliness and its marvels! But you shall go visit these wonders, or read of them in faithful memory, since I have no leisure to dwell thereon.

It was late in the afternoon. Unwearied by the exertion of the morning the whole party listened approvingly to somebody's proposal that they should climb the cliff which rose in front of them, as they all sat comfortably resting in the broad veranda of the Quisisana Hotel, which looks out across the Salerno Bay.

On foot, or on donkeys, as each person pleased, away they defiled, up the narrow road, winding in and out among little villas, oozy peasants' cots, vine-wreathed walls, but always mounting up and up, the view widening and beautifying with every step. At last the road became a mere path; but by this time nobody thought of the way, in the delight of watching the grand panoramas spread out below.

They were now not far from the top. Here it was necessary to dismount and look over the famous abyss down which the Emperor Tiberius had a playful habit of flinging his guests when he wearied of their society or craved a little excitement. It was a bald, bare precipice, good 700 feet in height, down which they fell into the white breakers of the ever-restless sea. Here some adventurous Capriot, lately returned from England, had established a little refreshment place, and, as most of the party were English, it was necessary to patronize the smiling wretch and let him prove by the exorbitance of his charges that he had profited by his stay in the land of the free.

Crofton wandered off, turned an angle of the path where a great rock shut out the house and the gay party, and toiled on up to the top, where, among the ruins, rises a small chapel, in which a make-believe hermit lives and wheedles centimes out of the pockets of stray visitors. But just now the hermit was down at the restaurant drinking surreptitious glasses of red wine in the kitchen; so Crofton was left to gaze and marvel undisturbed.

Presently the sound of voices roused them. He heard Maud Annesley's merry laugh, and turning, found himself face to face with her and San Arpino.

Maud and Crofton had managed to pass the day without exchanging a word. She had appeared as oblivious of his contiguity as only a woman can. But now, at sight of him, she said gayly, "So you had stolen a march on us after all, Mr. Crofton. I thought we were the first up."

"Where are the others?" he asked, since it was necessary to speak. "Oh, drinking sour wine and listening to our naturalized compatriot's enormous fibs," she answered.

San Arpino spoke pleasantly to Crofton in his quiet, broken English. He was always civil, even cordial, and apparently perfectly unconscious that his attempts at friendship were neither desired nor welcome, though indeed Crofton was too just a man to visit Miss Annesley's sins upon a rival.

At this place the descent on the Salerno side was rocky, but little less steep than at the point called Tiberius' Leap; but the descent did not, as these, commence from the top. A steep path led down some twenty feet to a little platform of rock, whereon grew a crooked fig tree; from thence a sheer wall of cliff plunged perpendicularly to the sea.

After a brief conversation, Crofton walked away to the opposite side of the summit, to survey the ruins, leaving the young pair to themselves. Maud Annesley was in a mood, when some wild, reckless performance possessed an irresistible attraction to her. She and San Arpino stood looking down at the stunted pine that clung to the platform of rock, and swung its ragged branches about, as if imploring to be released from its perilous position.

"I want to go down there," Maud said. "I am sure nothing but a mountain goat has ever stood under that tree. I want my name out on the trunk!"

San Arpino was as young and reckless as herself. He offered no opposition—rather admiring her courage, indeed. Though difficult, however, the path seemed to present no real danger if care were exercised.

A few minutes later, Howard Crofton, standing on the opposite side of the cliff, which looked out seaward, was roused from his gloomy meditations by a cry so wild and agonized that for years after it used to haunt his dreams. It was Maud Annesley's voice again; but so changed, so sharp with agony, so mad with fear, that for an instant it rooted him to the spot where he stood. Then away he rushed across the summit, gained the other side, and looked over. Maud Annesley was clinging to the fragments of rock, half way down to the platform, and trying to disengage her dress from a trailing vine which held her fast. She was in safety. He saw that. But he saw, too, the prostrate form of the young Italian, aiding helplessly and slowly towards the narrow platform of rock from whence the precipice began.

San Arpino had stepped a little out of the path, the better to aid Maud, had slipped and had struck his head so violently against a projecting stone that it knocked him almost senseless. He was slipping down now—down, down, Maud unable to extricate herself so as to rush to his aid.

Crofton saw it all, in the brief second he stood motionless, and a hundred years seemed to pass in that whirling space. With each new slide the body would go faster—faster! When it reached the platform, and trying to disengage her dress from a trailing vine which held her fast, she was in safety. He saw that. But he saw, too, the prostrate form of the young Italian, aiding helplessly and slowly towards the narrow platform of rock from whence the precipice began.

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