

Sybil's Doom

"Then you are quite safe, in spite of Angus Macgregor. If he doubts your identity, they will set him down a madman. Now, you see, there is no alternative. You can't marry me; you must marry Sybil, the heiress. And when she is your wife, and you have her fortune within your grasp, tell her who you are, and come to me for your reward."

"And you?"

"The widow laughed—a mocking peal. 'Oh, I will go with you, then, and we will live in splendor on the spoil—that is, if Sir Rupert will be obstinate, and won't make me 'my lady.' Now we understand each other. Obey, and I will be your friend; refuse, and I will be the first to tear you to pieces and show your rot to the world as an impostor—a base-born wretch—an escaped galley-slave. Shall we say adieu for the present? It is time to dress for dinner. Not being Lady Chudleigh as yet, I really can not take it upon myself to invite you to stay. And if I could, I wouldn't. Sir Rupert is jealous, poor dear."

She laughed again as she rose—a sweet little laugh—and held out her white hand.

"My dear colonel, pray don't look quite so much like a death-head and cross-bones. That flippant (I would call you 'The Knight of the Woful Countenance'), and really you deserve it. Don't hope to win the handsome heiress with that moody face. Try to look amiable, if you can. It's just as easy, and even so much pleasanter."

He caught the hand she held out in a grasp that made her wince.

"And that is the end? There is no hope? I must obey you, or—"

"Please let go my hand; you are crushing it to atoms. Yes, you must obey me, or— We won't finish, for you will obey."

"And if Sybil Trevanion refuses to marry me?"

"The widow shrugged her sloping shoulders, and moved to the door.

"Look to yourself, then. Poor, weak heart! don't you know your Shakespeare?"

"The man that hath a tongue, I say is no man. If with that tongue he cannot win a woman!"

Farewell for the present. When you have proposed, and she has accepted, come back, and let me be the first to congratulate you."

The words were strangely like the farewell words of old Hester. She was gone, with her soft, sliding step and insolent smile, she spoke, and the darkly menacing glance, the look of baffled love, of bitter hate combined, which Cyril Trevanion cast after her, was all unseen. It might have warned her, as it had in the dangerous road she was treating there had been any turning back.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Cyril Trevanion rode slowly homeward through the sultry gray of the August evening, his gloomy face set in an expression of dark, dogged resolution. It was "written," it was his fate; those two women so unlike in all other things, so like in this one fell purpose, were driving him headlong to his doom. They had him hopelessly under their heels; there was no alternative but blind obedience.

"I will do it, since I must," he said inwardly; "and if she refuses, let them take care! Coward as I am, I can be dangerous when goaded to desperation. A coward frenzied into fight is ten times more terrible than a brave man. I will ask Sybil to be my wife before I sleep."

But when, in the crystal moonlight, the ex-colonel reached the villa, it was to find himself baffled for that time at least. Through the French windows of the drawing room, standing wide open, he could see the graceful figure of the heiress seated at the piano, and the man he hated most on earth standing beside her, looking as happy as Adam in Eden.

"May the old demon fly away with him!" muttered the Indian officer; "if I had a pistol I would be tempted to shoot him where he stands. By Heaven! I could marry her now if I could, were it only to triumph over him. No one need look twice to see what those two faces say."

He wheeled round and walked off to the stables to smoke and amuse himself with the steeds. He had a passion for horses, and the Trevanion stables had always been the pride of the family. He emerged just in time to see the tenant of the Retreat take his departure. Sybil stood in the brilliant moonlight on the portico, and looked up in his face with shy, happy grace, all new in his experience of her, as she gave Macgregor her hand.

"Remember your promise," she said softly; "I shall never know peace until the mystery is solved."

"I am not likely to forget. Before yonder full moon wanes, the secret will be revealed."

He held her hand just a thought longer, perhaps, than there was any real necessity for, then he was gone. He kept no horse—he rarely rode, yet he could go across country like a bird; and to-night he crashed through the dewy grass and tall ferns with long, swift strides. He passed very close to where Cyril stood, whistling an old Scottish air that Sybil often played, and with an inexpressible happy glow on his handsome face. The hidden watcher clinched his right hand vindictively, and his black eyes glared in the darkness, like the eyes of a beast of prey.

"If I only had a pistol!" he hissed, for the second time under his breath. "I would shoot him down—toward as I am—like a dog!"

The heiress of Trevanion stood on the moonlit portico until the tall Macgregor disappeared. She lingered still, tempted by the unutterable beauty of the night, when her cousin strode up.

"You, Cyril!" she said, with a little start, "you're smiling so pleasant tonight. How late you are. You have been to Chudleigh Chase, of course."

"My being at Chudleigh Chase is no matter of course, that I can see. As to the interest—it is so early for me, I presume, as for the gentle breeze, who knows like an underground mole in

Monkswood Retreat. I saw him go just now."

The color rose in Sybil's fair face—he could see the angry flush, the kindling sparkle in her eye, even in the moonlight.

"Will you be kind enough to recollect, Colonel Trevanion, that the 'underground mole' you speak of so contemptuously saved my life. He averted my life at the risk of his own, and in gratitude never was a failing of the Trevanions until—of late."

The haughty blue eyes flashed itself erect—the bright blue eyes flashed indignation. Truly, Cyril Trevanion's wailing opened unpropitious enough.

"They can be ungenerous, at least," he retorted, stung by the recollection of how her life had been saved, "or you'd never taunt me with that. I explained—my recent illness—my shattered nerves—"

"I beg your pardon," Sybil exclaimed, hastily, shrinking sensitively from the subject; it was ungenerous, but you stung me into it. You are no friend of Mr. Macgregor—all the more reason, my good cousin, why you should not stoop to the smallness of slandering him behind his back. A brave man never stands in the dark. Say what you have to say to Mr. Macgregor himself—he is quite capable, I fancy, of taking his own part—but pray don't slight him to me. Goodnight."

She swept away with the queenly grace and pride characteristic of La Princesse, leaving the hero of Balaklava to anathematize his own folly, and this slender girl's indomitable spirit.

"A promising beginning," he muttered, with a bitter laugh; "I am peculiarly fortunate in my love-making. Mrs. Ingram ought to see me now."

Next morning, when the cousins met at breakfast, Sybil wore her iciest face; but the pent-up expression of Cyril dispersed the little cloud at once. He had offended her, and he was sorry—Miss Trevanion was a great deal too large-hearted and generous to ask more than that. So she accepted the olive branch at once, and talked good-naturally to the young man, and promised to walk over with him to the Priory immediately after breakfast, to see the improvements he was about to make. The workmen were to begin that very day, and nothing must be touched without Sybil's approbation.

"It is very complimentary to you, Cyril," she said, carelessly; "but not in the least necessary to consult me. Of course, I should be sorry to see the dear old place much altered—but I fancy there is no danger of that."

Your indifference to me and my doings and my belongings is plain enough. Heaven knows," Cyril answered, bitterly, "there is little need to tell me of it. And yet it was the thought of you, and you only, that ever brought me here."

Which was strictly true. He thought of Miss Trevanion and her splendid rent roll and dowry. They were walking along a cool, leafy arcade, very near the west gate of Monkswood, very near the Priory Walk, as he said this.

A vivid contrast they were. Sybil, so fair, so bright, so beautiful, her beauty only set off by the sombre hue of her dress and coquettish, little black hat; he so dark, so moody, so stern.

"It was for your sake I returned to Speckhaven," Colonel Trevanion continued, looking at the grass, at the trees, anywhere but at that bright, fair face, with its crystal eyes—for yours alone. You loved me once—as a child, at least. I came back, in the hope that you might forget my past, and love me still; and I saw you beautiful as a dream, but cold as a statue of snow. Yes, Sybil, my cousin—my love—you have my secret at last. Is the old affection hopelessly dead? Have you no place in your heart for Cyril Trevanion?"

The words were well enough—but the tone! Ah! hypocrite and dissembler though he was, the false ring of spurious coin was there, and the girl's keen ear caught it from the first word.

She looked steadfastly up in his face, a cynical smile curving the rosy lips.

"Cousin Cyril," she said, with that provoking smile, "when did Mrs. Ingram jilt you?"

"Sybil!"

"Yes, I know. That look of shocked indignation is very well got up, but it doesn't in the slightest deceive me. It must have been last evening, for you haven't seen her to-day. My poor cousin. Why, I could have told you from the first how it would be. Prince Fortunatus, in the fairy tale, or Sir Rupert Chudleigh, are the only men to suit little Madame Ingram."

His face blackened with anger. He had guessed from the beginning that this would be the result—he had said so—but the defeat was none the less stinging when it came. And with the knowledge of how peerless, how lovely, how wealthy she was.

"You pay me but a poor compliment, Colonel Trevanion," the young lady said in slow, sarcastic tones, "to come here this morning, and offer me the hand and heart Mrs. Ingram refused last night. Believe me, I know fully, and appreciate at its true worth, the love you have lavished upon me since your return. But I did not think—no, Cyril Trevanion, I did not think you would have insulted me by such an offer as this."

"Insulted, Sybil?"

"What is it but an insult?" the young girl cried, her eyes flashing blue fire, her cheeks aflame. "Do you think me blind? Do you think me an idiot? Has it not been plain to all the world that Mrs. Ingram has held you in the maddest of mad infatuations from the first? Have you had eyes, or ears, or thought for me? And when she rejects you, as I know she has rejected you, you come to me. For what? For spite and my money? Or, perhaps, she has advised you to do it—such a prudent, far-seeing, kind-hearted little woman as she is! Cyril Trevanion, if you had struck me, I think I could have forgiven you sooner than for asking me to be your wife!"

The passionate words poured vehemently out. He made no attempt to check them. His cowardice and his sense of guilt were too great.

"You do well," she went on, "to recall the old love, the childish worship I had for my soldier cousin. But the Cyril Trevanion of fifteen years ago is not the Cyril Trevanion of to-day. You have changed, I think, as no man ever changed before. That old dream of a violent death in the first hour of your return. There is not a laborer in yonder field, but has as warm a heart as you, and you know it. How dare you, sir, ask me to marry you, without affection—without even respect, I think—for my wealth, and to spite the widow Ingram? How dare you do it, sir?"

She stamped her little foot passionately, she clinched one tiny hand until the nails sunk in the pink palm; the violet eyes were black with anger and wounded pride, the cheeks hot, the whole face aflame.

So Angus Macgregor saw her, as he stood under the shadow of his front-door sycamore and watched them come up.

Cyril Trevanion stalked moodily by her side, his eyes downcast, not daring to meet those flashing, fearless glances, his craven soul quailing within him.

"Do you think I cannot see her work in this," she went on, vehemently—"her artful, designing prompting? She fools you to the top of your bent, and when you ask her to be your wife, she did all she could to get you into a poor man's indeed, and a baronet with eight thousand a year within reach! Go and ask your cousin Sybil," she tells you; "we are too poor to make a love match. Go and marry her, and win back your lost fortune! That was her advice, was it not? And you obediently acted upon it at once. Cyril Trevanion, I will never forgive you to my dying day!"

Hot tears of pride and passion filled the angry blue eyes. She dashed them indignantly away, and went on:

"If it were in my power to restore you the fortune you have lost, Heaven knows I would open my hands and let it flow like water. I would never retain one farthing that should rightfully be yours. But it is not in my power. The will that leaves all to me contains a special clause against its ever returning, directly or indirectly, to you. Should I ever become your wife, every stiver goes that hour to the Trevanions of Cornwall."

And once I loved a man—did all I know the sooner it would have saved me a proposal this morning from Colonel Trevanion."

"You are right," Cyril muttered between his teeth; "it would, by Heaven!"

She stopped at once, facing him full, her head thrown back, her eyes glittering, her face deathly pale.

"You stand confessed, then," she said, panting, white with anger. "The cold-blooded craven and traitor I thought you! And once I loved a man—did all I know the sooner it would have saved me a proposal this morning from Colonel Trevanion."

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