Andover News.

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Philip Raynor's Bride;

OR

MAJOR VILLARS' FATAL MISTAKE.

BY RETT WINWOOD.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SECRET TOLD.

It was little enough. Toinette merely knew that Dulcie was a friendless waif, who had been brought up in New York by an old woman named Hannah Dane, to whose care she had been intrusted when a very little child.

Hannah had been kind to the girl, clothed, fed and sent her to school as long as she had any money. She always claimed that Dulcie was a great heiress, and some day would richly repay her when she came into the fortune of which she had been defrauded.

But the poor old woman died suddenly in object poverty, and that was the last of Dulcie's great dreams.

No one came to claim her, or to take any interest in her fate, and she was soon forced to believe the fortune had only existed in Hannah's too vivid imagination.

Major Villars may have thought differently, for an ugly scowl darkened his brow as he listened, and when Toinette ceased speaking, he said:

"That girl is your natural enemy. I am glad you are learning to hate her. You shall have your revenge on her for stealing your lover away; I will look to that."

But Toinette only buried her face in the pillows with another burst of bitter sobs.

There was no news of Philip. She mentally pictured him as foolishly happy with Dulcie, his newly made bride. What was revenge to her now? It could not bring him back.

For several days Major Villars continued to come and go between Bonnyview Hall and the lodging-house in the village, where his ward was slowly recovering her health and strength.

The same slatternly girl always let him in. Even Toinette noticed how persistently Mrs. Griffin kept out of the way.

"Why, you have never even seen the woman," she exclaimed; "and she has been very kind to me."

But the Major's curiosity was first aroused by some words Dr. Dodge carelessly dropped one day.

"It is strange that Mrs. Griffin should shun and fear you so. She knew Toinette's mother.

Major Villars turned very pale and said hastily:

"Are you sure? Who is the woman?"

"A native of the village, who removed to another place years ago and married there. I have forgotten her maiden name, if I ever heard it."

That was enough. The instant Dr. Dodge left the house Major Villars made his way to the parlor down stairs and summoned the slip-shod servant.

"I must see your mistress," he said, peremptorily.

"Please, sir, she's busy, and can't come," stammered the girl.

"No matter. Go to her and say I shall not leave the house until she has granted me an interview."

Mrs. Griffin came—there was no help for it. She was pale and trembling. The instant their eyes met Major Villars started back with a faint, half-incredulous cry.

"Nurse Drayton!"

"Yes; that is the name by which I was known previous to my marriage," said the woman, shaking more than ever.

Major Villars piercing gaze rested upon her agitated face for some seconds, then he led her to a chair and said, with forced composure:

"This meeting is most opportune. You are the midwife who was with Mrs. Lynton when Toinette was born. I have wished for days that I might find some trace of you."

Mrs. Griffin shrank from him, white with terror, clasping her hands convulsively together.

"What do you want?" she panted.

"All the facts connected with that eventful night," he coolly answered. "It is my conviction some of them were kept back at the time."

"I have nothing to tell—nothing. Let me go."

She attempted to rise from her chair, but he thrust her forcibly back.

"Not until you have answered a few questions. How many children saw the light in that upper room on a certain evening many years ago? You will be at no loss to understand without further particularizing."

"Mercy! I—I——"

"Answer me!"

She saw his face darken frightfully with rage, and recoiling, gasped in childish terror:

"There were two twin daughters. Oh, for the good Lord's sake, be merciful and forgive me."

Major Villars gnashed his teeth, and began gnawing his lip in the cold, cruel way he had when excited.

"So you deceived me, woman, as the time tried to me? What led you to do it?"

"Because, sir, I could not shelter the poor dying mother's prayers and entreaties."

"The children were both born alive?"

"Yes, sir."

"What became of the other one? I must and will know. Tell me the whole truth without reservation, or it will be the worse for you."

He bent over her threateningly, his face so blue and livid with anger, the poor, trembling old soul fancied her hour had come.

"Spare me, sir. Spare my life, and I'll make a clean breast of everything!" she moaned, dropping on her knees in the most abject terror.

Major Villars replaced her in the chair with no gentle hand.

"Go on, you old fool. The whole story, remember."

After gasping once or twice, Mrs. Griffin said, in a hoarse, strained voice, with many pauses:

"Perhaps you will call to mind that I was cent for very suddenly that night seventeen years ago. I found poor Mrs. Lynton lying alone in an upper chamber. I was six experienced nurse then, those days, and something told me, the minute I looked into her sweet face, she would not long survive the trial that awaited her.

"Why didn't you tell me of your fears?"

"Because it was a mere superstition on my part, and I knew you would laugh at me."

"Well, well, go on."

"The sick lady seemed very unhappy—she did nothing but sob and moan in a pitiful way that went straight to my heart. When she knew she had given birth to twins, she became half mad with excitement.

"'Look the door,' she said, in a faint, soft whisper, 'and admit no one until I give you permission.'

"I obeyed. We were alone in the room. She beckoned me to approach, and added, in a scarcely audible tone, looking down tenderly on her innocent babes:

"'I am dying. I want you to save one of these dear little ones from the clutches of a villain. I cannot hope to save both, but you can hide one of them, take her away, and he will never know. Oh, promise me!'

Mrs. Griffin paused in embarrassment, and Major Villars sternly demanded:

"Well, what else did the demented woman say? About me, I mean."

"She told me that her husband had died suddenly two months before, after making a will that gave you almost absolute control over her large fortune; that she was satisfied you were a hypocrite and a villain; that you were scheming to make the immense wealth Bertrand Lynton had left entirely your own, and no life was safe that stood between you and the fulfillment of your purpose."

"A pretty character, upon my word, to give a man," sneered the Major. "But please bear in mind that my accuser was an insane woman."

"She begged me to take one of the infants away with me secretly when I left the house," Mrs. Griffin went on, "and let her grow up in obscurity, ignorant of her very name, until she should arrive at years of maturity, when she would be better fitted to cope with the villainy of a cunning, unscrupulous wretch.

"'The other poor darling must be abandoned to the mercy of my dead husband's false friend,' said the dying mother. 'God keep and guard her. It is better to sacrifice one than leave both to perish.'

"I could not refuse the suffering mother's prayer. I dragged one of the poor little babes to still its cries, hid it in the folds of my shawl, and took it with me on leaving the house. Mrs. Lynton, as you know very well, sir, died before the dawn of day."

Major Villars turned abruptly, and walked up and down the room in stern silence for several minutes. At length he said:

"Mrs. Lynton's suspicions were cruelly unjust to me. Toinette has been carefully watched and guarded, grown to womanhood under the same roof where she was born. She has been pampered and petted like the favored child of fortune. Now I ask you what has been the fate of the little one cast so ruthlessly upon the world?"

"Mrs. Lynton's instructions were carried out to the letter. I took the infant to a poor cousin of mine living in another town, and confided her to her care."

"What was your cousin's name?"

"Hannah Dane."

"Though she Major was prepared for this, he could not repress a start.

"How much of this silly story did you tell her?"

"Not a word. I simply charged her to rear the child carefully, for she was well born, and would one day be a great heiress.

Major Villars frowned, and began viciously gnawing his under lip again.

"What has become of this woman?" he inquired, after a thoughtful silence.

"She removed to New York City, and I lost trace of her. I cannot say whether she is living or dead."

"And the child?"

"I am utterly ignorant of the little one's fate."

"She would be a young lady now if she lived to grow up. Strange," sneered Major Villars, "that you should suffer yourself to lose sight of one who, if your improbable tale be true, can claim an equal share with Toinette in the large fortune left by their dead father and mother."

"As time went on I lost my interest in the matter. Indeed, I had half forgotten it until your ward was brought to my house a few nights since, and her likeness to poor Mrs. Lynton brought it all vividly back to my mind. And—and—there was another reason, sir, why I felt little inclination to bestir myself," added the trembling woman.

"What?"

"I—I had a deep dread and fear of yourself, sir. That is why I tried to keep out of your sight."

She was pale as death, and shaking as if in an ague fit. Major Villars at once resolved to play upon her terrors. Advancing threateningly toward her he hissed between his teeth:

"You do well to stand in awe of me. Ever lisp one word of this ridiculous story to a living soul, and I swear I'll murder you!"

The woman again flung herself before him with abjectly uplifted hands.

"Spare me, for Heaven's sake! The torture of the rack could not wring a syllable from my lips."

"You are safe while you keep a discreet tongue in your head—not a moment longer, if—the thought answered, turning on his heel.

After that day Toinette returned to Bonnyview Hall, and before the end of the week she had nearly recovered from her wedding illness.

Had she been with Philip Raynor at present, she would have followed the bride and groom at once, but no one knew where they were spending the honeymoon.

The day following her return home Guy Mandeville made his appearance at Bonnyview Hall. The handsome villain carried one arm in a sling and wore a bandage round his forehead. He had been quite seriously injured by that fall from his horse.

A storm-belated traveler, finding him lying by the roadside, had taken him to the nearest farmhouse. For several days he was unable to leave his bed.

His first act on rising from it was to hurry back to Dead Man's Cottage, where he learned how strangely heaven had interposed to set his helpless captive at liberty.

Afterward he boldly followed Toinette to Bonnyview Hall, and, on arriving there, was closeted for two hours or more with Major Villars, and from the latter's lips learned all that had occurred.

"Your interests and mine are identical," said the Major, at the conclusion of their long interview. "I could tell you why if I saw fit, but I do not. If you are wise, you will keep no secrets from me hereafter, or attempt to carry on any little game by yourself."

Guy felt the force of this warning. It certainly would have been better for all had he gone frankly to Major Villars with the truth the moment he learned that Dulcie had taken Toinette's name and place.

He gave no regretful thought to Dulcie. Her marriage with Philip Raynor had removed a dangerous rival from his path.

It was Toinette's beauty and audacity that had fired his blood, and stirred the deeps of his nature as no passion save love or avarice could have moved him.

What mattered it that Dulcie was rightfully co-heiress with Toinette to the vast property in land, houses, mines, bank stock, and railway shares from which he and Major Villars derived the princely income that supported them both, since she had no inkling of the fact.

"I will wed Toinette in spite of her cold disdain," he said to himself, "and thus gain absolute control of all the vast fortune."

But, growing wiser from experience, he resolved to proceed with extreme caution.

The first time Toinette met him after his return, he wore a humble, penitent air, and was looking very handsome and interesting in the unaccustomed role of invalid.

"You!" she cried, her eyes blazing with anger and scorn. "How dare you darken these doors after all that has passed? If my guardian did his duty, he would turn you out like a dog!"

Guy heaved a sigh, and gazed at her with a soft entreaty that was well calculated to disarm resentment.

"I am truly sorry for the rude, ungentlemanly conduct to which my love for you led me, Toinette; there is not the slightest excuse for it. But the thought of losing you drove me beside myself. I was hardly accountable for my own acts. When you see how sincere is my repentance, will you not try to forgive me, and be friends again?"

He looked so remorseful and spoke in such sweet, persuasive tones, that for a moment Toinette, in her woman's heart, almost pitied him.

"I will make no attempt to prejudice my guardian against you," she said, after a pause. "But the less I see of you the better I will be pleased."

"You are an angel of goodness!" Guy gratefully exclaimed.

He wisely refrained from pressing the advantage further; indeed, for a time he seemed rather to avoid Toinette. If the capricious girl were won at all, it would be by cunning and artifice.

"I will make haste slowly," he said to himself.

Toinette, on her part, was impatiently biding the time when a word from her lips would sunder Philip and Dulcie forever. She thought of little else.

She was still in the mood when, on going to the city one day to do some shopping, she beheld the fugitive bride and groom just embarking on one of the numerous ferry boats.

She darted forward, but the crowd impeded her way, and she reached the dock a moment too late. But what did it matter. The hour of retribution was coming soon.

CHAPTER XV.

THE STORM BURSTS.

Highlands was beautifully situated on the slope of a gentle hill a mile and a half from Bonnyview Hall. The charming grounds were full of fragrance and bloom, but the stately, old-fashioned mansion, in which many generations of Ravners had lived and died, possessed a quaint beauty peculiarly its own.

At the open window of the drawing-room sat the fair young bride. Her beautifully rounded arms, banded with seed pearls, were flung carelessly across the sill. She was gazing out at the lovely landscape, her great, velvety eyes full of sickening dread and terror.

Dulcie had been twenty-four hours at Highlands, and the blow she expected had not yet fallen. But it might descend at any moment. She started and shuddered violently as her wandering glance rested a length upon the dark walls of Bonnyview Hall, dimly seen through the trees.

"I shall be exposed—disgraced—driven forth into the world," she said to herself. "A little while, and only the memory of the happy days spent with Philip will be left to me."

She no longer felt to be struggling against fate. What was the use? The sight of Toinette's dead face—for such she supposed it to be—had taken away all her strength and courage. She was haunted. She might evade the living, but who can run away from the dead?

"Wherever I go, I shall see that pale, reproachful face until goaded to confession," she sobbed.

So she had meekly yielded to her husband's wish that they proceed at once to Highlands and spend the rest of the honeymoon in the halls of his ancestors. It was like boarding the lion in his den; but why put off the evil hour?

"I have been a wayfarer nearly all my life," Philip had said. "It would be a delightful sensation to sit down at my own fireside and feel that I need roam no more. After all, there is no place like home. I have been secretly longing for Highlands ever since we went away."

So she yielded without a demurrer a word. But Philip wondered at her pallor and strange stillness.

They were warmly welcomed by Mrs. Rush, the housekeeper, though that good woman had been taken completely by surprise, matchless laugh rang through the room, and ended in a hysterical sob.

"Don't tell me! I hate you! You have—what will Philip say when he knows that the wife of his bosom is an arrant—no, no, no, no! I will have revenge! I will! I will! I will