

CRUEL

AS

THE GRAVE;

THE SECRET OF DUNRAVEN CASTLE.

BY ANNIE ASHMORE,
Author of "Faithful Margaret," Etc., Etc.

CHAPTER V.—(Continued.)

"You never mean me to believe that you would have liked to let them down, do you?" cried she straightening herself and looking down upon him with two flashing, incredulous eyes.

Up to this, Edgar had listened as to an idle colloquy, for the mere delight of hearing Ulva's voice, but now a more personal interest chained him to the spot. What lover could withstand the temptation of hearing his lady speak about him while ignorant of his proximity?

And by the dawning rose in her cheek and the keener gaze of the old man, he knew his name was coming.

"There was but one life especially in danger—and it was not I who saved it. It was my lady's will that sent me three times down after him—and it was my lady's ain proud hands that pulled him from the wave."

"Hush!" whispered Ulva, blushing scarlet, and darting uneasy glances around; while Edgar turned cold and faint beneath the shock of delight—for this he had not heard till now.

"Who said that?" demanded Ulva, defiantly; "certainly you were in no condition to know what happened; poor fellow, you did your duty like a brave man then, and I won't believe you regret it now."

"Weel, then, Mr. Sircombe said it," Ulva looked astonished; then dismissed the point as trivial, and attacked the main one.

"And is it Mr. Edgar you are warning me against?"

"Deed it is, Lady Oolava; and an ill day for Dunraven when the soft and supple Lowlander won it."

"Sible harm, you are wicked. What possible harm could he do to any other stranger? (Oh, Ulva,) do to my father's daughter?"

"When the day comes the deed will be done. 'Twas your ain hand laid it upon him as his wife. He will never die until he has paid ye for his life with woe and wrong. Ah, lady, ye blanch a fater—listen, there may yet be time to turn the doom aside, if ye wad speak the word."

Ulva was silent, however. Edgar saw that her sweet face was wan and troubled.

"One word," urged Kenmore, eagerly, "and the Englishman will be on the main land before this sun goes down?"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Ulva, indignantly.

"Is Lord Inchcape's daughter to shrivel for a quest from her father's roof like a village boy, out of respect to a barbarous super-tition?"

"Ohno! woe worth the day!" lamented Kenmore, "the gnamour's upon you already, he's cast his spell over you, you've taken that first step that fatal road when your maiden heart goes out to him in pity—"

"Silence!" cried Ulva imperiously, pride and shame crimsoning her cheeks and flashing from her eyes. "You overstep the bounds of respect. I will not have the descendant of the mossy steps, waving him out of her path with a royal gesture, but he still stood before her with clasped hands and beseeching face.

"Oh, my bonny mistress, whom I have borne in my arms a bairn, it's not in a heart so lead to you to let you pass on unwarned to a woful love. It was his like that brought the curse on Inchcape, and you'd do him wrong, an I wad come over to it her? Mind you this, Lady Oolava: Hearts as proud and pure as your own have been made a summer toy by comely Englishmen, and flung under the heel when tired of. And I warn you—I warn you—as sure as death I'll do it upon that day when Captain Edgar puts forth his hand to take your heart, a Highland dirk will flash a death in his own if all England should cry murder!"

Kenmore spoke quietly, but with a fierce menace in his manner; but the lady did not flinch. Her form towered haughtily, her fine nostrils quivered; her dark eyes shot forth wrathful lightning.

"And I warn you, Kenmore, that if you dare again betray a sign of this superstitious meddling with the guest who is under this roof—if he were Satan himself—I shall banish you from my presence, and never look upon your face again." Having thus passed judgment, she swept past him with incomparable dignity, and left the garden.

Kenmore gazed sadly after her.

"Ah, ay!" murmured he, with a plaintive tone, "I need not say the word, there ye gang, proud an' disdainful as a queen; but it's a maiden's heart ye carry in your bonny breast, an' a maiden's hearts can ay be won an' broken. Ohno! Ohno! black fall the day when I steered the Cursed Guest to Sleat na Vreckan!"

Edgar sank down in his place with his thoughts wandering through his brain; pain—hope—and new-born dread of the future.

Lapped in luxurious weakness since his convalescence began, he had done nothing but think of her and let his heart drift on to adoration, unchecked by any doubt. Now conscience ricked him and bade him consider to what misery he might bind her future, should he grant the prayer of his heart and awake her love. A gulf of unknown depth separated him from Lord Inchcape's daughter; the secret which had spoiled Lord Inchcape's life, parted him from his wife, and sent Ulva to share her exile—the sent the gulf that divided them. He—this was the gulf that he had no right in honor to let one thought of love right in his feet. True, he might never awake her heart; still he knew that as sure as he permitted his own to go out freely to her, he could never keep out of her life until he had fought his best to win her.

"I must fly from this place," groaned he in sudden anguish; "it is not only my peace that I risk, it might be hers."

And then a great flood of passion

swept over him—he scorned at that virtuous resolve. Why should he not fight it out, and perhaps win her, and save her from the mysterious life of unnatural seclusion which seemed to await her, though no guilt of hers?

Again honor spoke, and he recalled the love and duty which he owed his kinsman, and the entire faith which he had always felt in his nobility.

He could never have acted unjustly nor cruelly toward his child.

Edgar bowed beneath these conflicting waters of passion; his soul was in deep travail.

During his illness Lady Dunraven had been much with him; he could not disassociate her constant, hovering presence from the long, burning, restless nights of delirium; nor her eager, spirit-like face from his death-like slumbers, when at first sleep came back to him.

As he grew stronger, she still sat with him hour by hour; a pale, burning-eyed presence, her own brow spoke, but followed her own brooding thoughts through the hour; yet always ready with her sweet kind smile, if he sought her eye; or with her small, deft, nervous hands when he wanted help. Other served her material wants; Mr. Sircombe, my lord's valet, amiably sacrificed himself to her conversing with him; but as if unhappy Engolande had been very close to him in spirit, through all the mystic labyrinth of fever, that he could never regard her with the imperious interest he might have given another woman.

His unacknowledged acquaintance with her secret had also lent to his peculiar, tender sweetness to his manner, that Lady Dunraven unconsciously yielded herself to its fascinations, and gradually turned her starved affections toward him, with that love of sentiment which the love a woman gives her young brother. The romance of her heart had all been laid to rest by her husband—she could never take it back; but she had yet some deep emotions left, and Edgar Arden had set them flowing.

She had always found a strange pleasure in contemplating his features, from that first night when he lay unconscious before her, to the still indulged in these long meditative studies; he would wake in the dead of night, when nothing seemed to live around them save the roaring sea, to find her brilliantly spiritual face bending toward him out of the darkness, with such a yearning look, that knowing her secret sorrow, his soul would respond to the mute cry for sympathy which would be felt as if he were mortal, and the service of a true knight in armor could bring her deliverance from her grief.

Edgar had not conferred himself so far as to resolve upon leaving the island and Ulva immediately, when an invitation came from Lady Dunraven to join her ladies in her parlor if he was feeling capable of the reception.

Mr. Sircombe was good enough to visit him while he was still coming over the welcome note, with sparkling eyes and bounding heart. He came upon him, gray and haggard, with some pricking discontent fresh upon him, a shade upon the lover's exultation.

"Ah, that is right; you have forsaken your lawful habits," said he, affecting general interest. He shook hands with Edgar, touched his pulse a moment, and shook his head with a rallying smile. "But you must not overdo it, Mr. Edgar. No new exertion to-day. I am not quite satisfied with that pulse. You are too easily excited, and excitement is specially to be avoided, if you mean to escape your captivity this week."

"I feel capable," said Edgar, unsuspectingly; "I mean to make my first debut in the ladies' parlors. Lady Dunraven has asked me to try it to-day."

Sircombe's hardening face showed that he had already learned this item, and felt no elation at the prospect.

He hesitated a little, then looked significantly at Edgar, and said:

"I would advise you not to try it to-day."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Edgar, dryly.

"Nor ever!" proceeded the director in a toneless voice.

"Sorry to disoblige you," retorted Edgar, his blood rising at the man's cool assumption of authority, "but I feel that I will accept Lady Dunraven's kind invitation. Our guests have been anxiously on my account. I am far stronger than you imagine," he added, ironically.

Mr. Sircombe walked about a little, knitting his brow and gnawing his lip.

He made an abrupt pause in front of Edgar, astonishing him by the intense animosity he betrayed in his face.

"I warn you," said he, quietly; "as one who has several years been intimately acquainted with the interests of this house, I warn you not to take advantage of the accident which has thrust you in our midst. Retire, as you came, a stranger; in no other way can you so worthily repay the kindness which has been shown you here."

Edgar's own conscience echoed these words; but Mr. Sircombe multiplied them in his month. What personal stake had he in the matter, that he should indulge in personal emotions.

"Fardon, but I am quite content to submit to Lady Dunraven's will in the matter," said Edgar, calmly; "I should be sorry, indeed, to cross you in anything that concerned your guests."

"I would have you understand that this matter concerns me nearly," cried Sircombe in great heat; "my lord placed me in this house as his own representative—I am sole director here."

"Do you then wish to inform me that Lord Dunraven would object to my paying my grateful debts to the ladies of this house, to whom I owe my life?"

Again Sircombe walked about the room, lowering and pondering, at a loss how to annihilate this persistent antagonist.

Again he halted before Edgar, giving him a bitter look.

"It'll become either you or me to discuss the concerns of this family," said he; "you are an utter stranger; you must accept my word as authorized by my position. Lord Dunraven does not intend to accept a husband for Lady Ulva. Were a prince of England to sue for her hand, it would be denied him. Rank, or genius, or worth, they are all alike, Lady Ulva will marry."

This statement, as it dropped slowly and deliberately from his lips, seemed to sicken speaker and hearer alike.

In passionate incredulity Edgar held his eyes with his own—Sircombe never wincing, but watched his shocked and troubled face with gloomy satisfaction.

"I need not apologize for offering you officious information," said he presently. "Your face betrays the interest with which you already regard the young lady. It betrays you to learn that she is never to be yours. Think, then, what affliction might be hers, if with such a sentiment in your heart you associated with her

in the informal and intimate relations natural to her present situation? Could you deny yourself the luxury of feeding your lover's eyes upon her—of showing your best side to her? of doing all that lovers do to stir her fancy and awake her heart? You could not—you could not. Then be generous, I implore you! Her father, who adores her, is not here to guard her; but if, to whom he confides her best side to her, I will guard her happiness against the world! I entreat—I command—you, to leave this home before you bring sorrow and a broken heart into it."

Without waiting to be questioned, the director bowed and departed, leaving Edgar overwhelmed.

Two mornings in one day.

CHAPTER VI.

THE KNIGHT ERIC'S APPEAL.

Alas for the perversity of human nature! These obstacles set in the way of the youthful pair's interest in each other had the effect of instantly increasing it tenfold.

Lady Ulva's proud spirit resented how the preference of even so esteemed a personage as Kenmore, and his parting threat had the power of investing the handsome stranger with a new and romantic interest. She had naturally thought of him much while he lay in the great state bed in the green working, but for some anxious days she had saved from the waves, but now she looked upon his image with very different eyes. Poor bantering Kenmore! He had with his own hand unsealed the fountain of the maiden's romance, and made Edgar the hero of it.

As for Edgar, the secretary's interference had thoroughly roused his opposition. The more he pondered upon the matter, the more certain he had made concerning Ulva, the more fiercely he doubted it. A deep distrust of Sircombe's character and motives began to haunt him; he felt it almost as a necessity laid upon him to stay and watch the man long enough to learn something of his nature and aims. Evidently, on Inchcape rested him fully, or he would never have placed him in such a position in his household; but then, Lord Inchcape never came to Dunraven, and knew no more than was reported to him—probably by Sircombe himself.

As a near connection of the family, Edgar reasoned that he had a right to remain with them if he chose, or could, and they did not quite close his eyes to the fact that love had a great deal to do with his decision, he would not allow this to daunt him.

He joined the ladies as he had been invited, and found Mr. Sircombe installed beside Ulva by a distant window, and Lady Dunraven seated apart by a little work-table. But she was not working; she looked quite close to sorrow; she leaned forward with both arms outstretched across the table, and listless hands dropping from the edge, her face all pale and rapt, her bright-bright eyes fixed upon the heaving waste of waters which stretched between her and the world.

No mortal, spending sickness could have spread such a hazy shadow over that beautiful countenance; there was the very shadow of hopelessness, agonizing misery in her attitude. Never before had Edgar chanced to see her thus, when, supposing herself quite unobserved, she had forgotten all around her, and given herself up to her despair.

Silently as a shadow he was at her side before one of the three noticed his entrance; heart-wrung and sore discomfited he did not quite close his eyes to the impulse that made him Ulva, who had taken her hand, and held it close between his two palms, while he gazed at her with devotion in his eyes.

She was not startled—her thoughts had been too far off for that. She slowly came back to the present, and looked at him with recognition—a strange glance that seemed to appraise him like a murmur of pain; not asking him for help, but needing it as the drowning mute needs rescue.

Then, with a faint quivering sign, she raised her hand and signed him to a place on a couch, luxuriously cushioned, which had evidently been prepared for him.

"Ah, you are not strong yet; be docile and recline here beside me," she said with a gentle smile. "And then she raised her voice and called Ulva, who turned round with a little bright cry of surprise, and came swiftly down the long room, smiling welcome.

She wore a dark-blue transparent dress, lucid as the mountain mists, and threaded here and there with gold; her slender waist was also girded with gold, and her hair, dressed for the evening, was fastened about her head by a pretty gold filagree. His whole heart went out to her as she came smiling to welcome him. Not only beauty had she, but such modesty and truth, and gentle womanhood, that all that was noblest in him bowed down before her.

This fair woman doomed to a loveless solitude?

By that nobility which he had ever found in Inchcape—no!

Yonder dark-lined, lowering face belonged to a traitor, that was easier to believe.

"Now you shall soon be well," said Ulva, giving him her hand while her beautiful eyes beamed pure friendliness upon him. "The worst is passed when you can leave the sick room; by this week is out I prophesy that you will be exploring all the wonders of this old fortress with Mr. Sircombe, who is an enthusiastic archaeologist."

Mr. Sircombe, from his distant vantage ground, bowed here as Edgar glanced at him, and a queer smile, just the end of one, flickered about his eyes.

"And are you also archaeological?" asked Edgar covetously, as a vision of that charming girl wandering by his side through gloomy dungeons and half-cloaked corridors rose before his mind's eye.

She had seated herself close to Lady Dunraven, and was speaking in the meshes of some exquisite bit of needlework she had been busy over, on my lady's knee. Edgar watched the fairy nimbleness of her fingers, small and pointed as a Spaniard's, but ivory white, with rosy nails; not a ring marred their delicacy, not a bracelet spoiled the perfection of their beauty. All alike, Lady Ulva's hands were airy.

This statement, as it dropped slowly and deliberately from his lips, seemed to sicken speaker and hearer alike.

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"I need not apologize for offering you officious information," said he presently. "Your face betrays the interest with which you already regard the young lady. It betrays you to learn that she is never to be yours. Think, then, what affliction might be hers, if with such a sentiment in your heart you associated with her

Sircombe would allow me to explore, but the best are sealed mysteries to me. There are chambers cut in the solid rock beneath the tower—below the level of the high tide mark; in old days we smothered our enemies there."

"I should like to explore them," said Edgar, thinking of the death-trap than of the ruby lips that spoke of them.

Mr. Sircombe abruptly stepped through the window beside him, and leaned over the broad stone balustrade, gazing at the glittering waves which lapped against the base of the cliff below.

The conversation proceeded as such between the youthful pair, Lady Dunraven leaning back in her carved chair, and listening or seeming to listen less than she looked at each animated face. Sometimes she roused herself to take part; and then Edgar, with mournful regret, could trace the signs of a once brilliant intellect, and now mouldering down to dull indifference. He had heard much of this unhappy lady's spirit and fascination in the days when she reigned as queen of the social circle in the Inchcape Fosse; like so many of her countrywomen, she had created a furor by her intellect, and now, mouldering down to dull indifference. He had heard much of this unhappy lady's spirit and fascination in the days when she reigned as queen of the social circle in the Inchcape Fosse; like so many of her countrywomen, she had created a furor by her intellect, and now, mouldering down to dull indifference. 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