

she seemed entirely oblivious to their gentle and delicately worded hints, and seldom ever spoke except when a direct question was asked her; then she would give a brief answer, and again relapse into silence, from which nothing could arouse her, except a cry from her infant, which never failed to excite in her the tender feelings of a mother, for with a passionate cry she would clasp it to her bosom and cover its little face with a mother's own kisses; then she would sit for hours, while such tears as only a mother's love can prompt, would gather in her eyes and fall upon its innocent face.

One morning, about a week after her convalescence, Estrella failed to make her appearance. Mrs. Miller, thinking perhaps something might be wrong, went to her room door, and receiving no answer after tapping repeatedly, she pushed open the door, and entered. Her astonishment can better be imagined than described, when after looking around, she found no other occupant save the baby who lay, buried up amid the fleecy bed-covering, kicking, crowing, laughing and looking about with wondering eyes, like an infant cherub. Mrs. Miller hastily approached the bed, and found pinned to the bosom of the baby's gown a neatly folded note; unpinning it she opened and read as follows:

MY MORE THAN FRIENDS!—Ere you read these words, I will doubtless be many miles from here. Would that you had let me die, and passed out of my misery forever, when I was cast like a waif upon your tender mercies; but since such a blissful boon was denied me, I must again take up the burden of life, and go out into the cold, bitter world, to earn my bread, for I can no longer encroach upon your kindness. I leave my child, though God alone knows the bitter struggle it cost me, yet I know with you she will be kindly cared for.

"You will find a sufficient sum of money in the small case on the table, to defray all of her expenses, until the time when I return to claim her; and in the same case you will find a bracelet, studded with a cluster of diamonds, set in the centre with a crimson heart; never on any conditions part with it, but keep it until my return, for it is an ancient family relic, and should I die ere my return, it belongs to my daughter. Try and think well of me for I am one of earth's most wronged and wretched daughters. Call my babe ESTRELLA MARSON, and in your prayers send up a petition for the lonely, broken hearted one who passes like an outcast from your door to-night."

Mrs. Miller, after reading this strange note, sank sobbing upon the floor, as though she was the injured one; and thus her husband found her, after having searched through every other room in the house. Now, reader, with your permission we will return to New York.

CHAPTER V.

THE FORGED LETTER.

Ah! woe to thy dream of love and delight;
Thy bright star's veiled in the darkness of night,

The deep sting of sorrow, is bowing thy head,
Since the idolized one, thy darling, has fled.

After parting with Guy Leaton, on that memorable night, Gilbert Douglas sought his home. He found it veiled in darkness, with not a sign of life about it. Using his night key he entered the house and found the servants all soundly asleep; and, what seemed to him as very strange, at such an early hour, not a single light gleamed from any part of the house. With a nameless fear of impending evil tugging at his heart strings, he passed hastily up the broad stair-case, and approaching his wife's sleeping apartment tapped gently at the door. Receiving no answer, he called softly:

"Estrella, Estrella, dear, are you asleep?" but no voice answered, and passing on to his own apartment, he murmured:

"Poor child, she was lonely, I expect; I should not have staid out so late, I shant disturb her to-night to show her her present; but I'll put it in the parlor to-night, and so surprise her in the morning;" and a smile played about his handsome mouth, as he thought what a surprise it would be.

Ah! Gilbert Douglas, had you but known how like a broken rose, culled from the parent stem, your darling then lay miles from you, withering in pain and grief, you would have gone through flames of fire to have reached her side.

Striking a light, Douglas passed on into the parlor, and after disposing of his vase, returned to his room, and throwing himself into an easy chair, was soon wrapt in the arms of morpheus; but his dreams, whatever they were, could not have been pleasant, for ever and anon a shade of grief passed over his face, and something like a moan of pain would escape his lips. He lay thus until the gray light of dawn, began to peer in at the eastern window, then with a convulsive shudder, he sprang to his feet exclaiming:

"Good Heavens! Estrella, where are you?" and he gazed around the room in a bewildered way, then suddenly recollecting every thing, he sank back in his chair murmuring: "such a horrible dream!"

He sat there until the sunlight glided in at the window, and the servants began to stir below; then he arose and sought his wife's room, he knocked at the door, but receiving no response, he pushed it open and went in, but as the reader already knows, Estrella was not there, neither was the bed disturbed, but there were several rich articles of wearing apparel scattered about the room, as if thrown down in great haste.

Douglas was now convinced that there was something wrong; and hastening to the top of the stair-case he called:

"Berry!"
"Yes, sir," answered the portly footman presenting himself before his master.

"Berry, have you seen your lady this morning?"

"No, sir," replied the wondering Berry, "I have not seen my lady since yesterday morning, when master Guy was here, and I supposed she went some where with him."

"No, that could not have been for Guy was with me last night. Call Mary, her maid, immediately." When Mary came in she presented a scared white face.

"Mary, do you know any thing of your lady?" asked Douglas, as soon as she had made her appearance.

"Lord help us! no sir; for sure I thought she was here, indeed I did," replied the girl.

"When did you see her last?"

"Why to be sure not since yesterday morning, when master Guy left; then she came out of her room, with her face all white and pale, and said she to me, 'Mary I have a very bad headache, and I am going to lie down; and do not come to my room under any circumstances whatever, unless I call you. Now, Mary, do you understand me?' 'Yes, marm,' says I, (then she went into her room and I haint seed her sence."

"Good heavens! what does all this mean? My darling, my darling! oh where are you? Berry, go to Guy's hotel, and tell him to come to me immediately;" and Gilbert Douglas rushed like an insane man below stairs, searching room, after room, for his lost ones; but it was a fruitless search, and at last, sinking down upon a chair, and clasping his hands to his burning brow, he exclaimed:

"Oh tell me! what does all this mean; is it reality, or is it all some terrible night-mare?" And strong man though he was, he sat there, weak and trembling, gazing imploringly into the frightened faces of the weeping servants, who had gathered around him. Just in the midst of it all, Guy Leaton rushed in exclaiming:

"What in the name of wonders does all of this fuss and this tale that Berry has been telling me, mean?"

"Ah, Guy," replied Douglas, "I know no more than yourself, it is all a mystery to me." Then, speaking to the servants, "Go out, all of you, and leave us alone." When the door closed, and they were alone, Douglas turned to Leaton, and said:

"I came home last night, thought Estrella was sleeping, concluded not to disturb her, went to her room this morning,

and she was not there. The servants have not seen her since yesterday morning, when you were here, which Mary tells me, was about eleven o'clock; now, did she say any thing to you about going out any where; and did you notice any change in her manners?"

"Suddenly, as if struck by some forcible thought, Guy Leaton sprang to his feet, then sinking back upon his chair murmured:

"Alas! my poor cousin, that you should have been so duped."

"What do you mean, Guy?" cried Gilbert, staring at him in utter amazement.

"What was that you were saying about being duped, Gay? I desire an explanation, for there is something wrong in all this mystery."

"Spare me, Gilbert, for what I know, I would rather you would strike me dead, as to force me to speak. What I do know, I could have told you last evening, but I did not wish to break your dream of peace."

Gilbert arose, and laying his hand on Leaton's shoulder, said in a hoarse, harsh voice:

"If you know any thing against my wife, I command you to speak out and tell me."

"Gilbert, my poor cousin, calm yourself."

"Tell me," he replied harshly, "what those dark insinuations mean, that you have made use of."

"Gilbert, if you must know, I must tell you, but understand me, I know nothing about Estrella, only what came from her own lips. Yesterday morning I came down here, and strangely enough found Estrella in tears. Upon asking the cause, she appeared to be embarrassed, and for some time would not tell me; but after a while, she seemed to be completely overcome with her grief, and seating herself by my side, she began a long account of how before she had ever seen you, she had met one Harry L'Estrange, and become engaged to him; and then, though loving him better than her life, she had forsaken him and married you, for your gold, and then—Oh, Gilbert! I cannot tell you any more."

"Go on," he replied hoarsely.

"Well, she said she had received a letter from L'Estrange that morning, entreating her to fly with him across the seas. That is all I know Gilbert; and I would never have told you this, had you not drawn it from me by force."

"Oh! God help me!" moaned Douglas, burying his face in his hands, then suddenly rousing himself he said; "Guy, there is the postman's click, attend to the mail please," Leaton went out, but soon returned and laid a letter down on the table before Douglas, who on seeing it, uttered a faint