



Chapter 2

Love's Curfew

“Fayfield Junction! Change for Elveston!”

What subtle memory could there be, linked to these commonplace words, that caused such a flood of happy thoughts to fill my brain? I dismounted from the carriage in a state of joyful excitement for which I could not at first account. True, I had taken this very journey, and at the same hour of the day, six months ago; but many things had happened since then, and an old man’s memory has but a slender hold on recent events: I sought “the missing link” in vain. Suddenly I caught sight of a bench—the only one provided on the cheerless platform—with a lady seated on it, and the whole forgotten scene flashed upon me as vividly as if it were happening over again.

“Yes,” I thought. “This bare platform is, for me, rich with the memory of a dear friend! She was sitting on that very bench, and invited me to share it, with some quotation from Shakespeare—I forget what. I’ll try the Earl’s plan for the Dramatization of Life, and fancy that figure to be Lady Muriel; and I wo’n’t undeceive myself too soon!”

So I strolled along the platform, resolutely “making believe” (as children say) that the casual passenger, seated on that bench, was the Lady Muriel I remembered so well. She was facing away from me, which aided the elaborate cheaterly I was practicing on myself: but, though I was careful, in passing the spot, to look the other way, in order to prolong the pleasant illusion, it was inevitable that, when I turned to walk back again, I should see who it was. It was Lady Muriel herself!

The whole scene now returned vividly to my memory; and, to make this repetition of it stranger still, there was the same old man, whom I remembered seeing so roughly ordered off, by the Station-Master, to make room for his titled passenger. The same, but “with a difference”: no longer tottering feebly along the platform, but actually seated at Lady Muriel’s side, and in conversation with her! “Yes, put it in your purse,” she was saying, “and remember you’re to spend it all for Minnie. And mind you bring her something nice, that’ll do her real good! And give her my love!” So intent was she on saying these words, that, although the sound of my footstep had made her lift her head and look at me, she did not at first recognize me.

CHAPTER 2 -- LOVE'S CURFEW

I raised my hat as I approached, and then there flashed across her face a genuine look of joy, which so exactly recalled the sweet face of Sylvie, when last we met in Kensington Gardens, that I felt quite bewildered.

Rather than disturb the poor old man at her side, she rose from her seat, and joined me in my walk up and down the platform, and for a minute or two our conversation was as utterly trivial and commonplace as if we were merely two casual guests in a London drawing-room. Each of us seemed to shrink, just at first, from touching on the deeper interests which linked our lives together.

The Elveston train had drawn up at the platform, while we talked; and, in obedience to the Station Master's obsequious hint of "This way, my Lady! Time's up!", we were making the best of our way towards the end which contained the sole first-class carriage, and were just passing the now-empty bench, when Lady Muriel noticed, lying on it, the purse in which her gift had just been so carefully bestowed, the owner of which, all unconscious of his loss, was being helped into a carriage at the other end of the train. She pounced on it instantly. "Poor old man!" she cried. "He mustn't go off, and think he's lost it!"

"Let me run with it! I can go quicker than you!" I said. But she was already half-way down the platform flying ("running" is much too mundane a word for such fairy-like motion) at a pace that left all possible efforts of mine hopelessly in the rear.

She was back again before I had well completed my audacious boast of speed in running, and was saying, quite demurely, as we entered our carriage, "and you really think you could have done it quicker?"

"No, indeed!" I replied. "I plead 'Guilty' of gross exaggeration, and throw myself on the mercy of the Court!"

"The Court will overlook it—for this once!" Then her manner suddenly changed from playfulness to an anxious gravity.

"You are not looking your best!" she said with an anxious glance. "In fact, I think you look more of an invalid than when you left us. I very much doubt if London agrees with you?"

"It may be the London air," I said, "or it may be the hard work—or my rather lonely life: anyhow, I've not been feeling very well, lately. But Elveston will soon set me up again.

CHAPTER 2 -- LOVE'S CURFEW

Arthur's prescription—he's my doctor, you know, and I heard from him this morning—is 'plenty of ozone, and new milk, and pleasant society'!"

"Pleasant society?" said Lady Muriel, with a pretty make-believe of considering the question. "Well, really I don't know where we can find that for you! We have so few neighbours. But new milk we can manage. Do get it of my old friend Mrs. Hunter, up there, on the hill-side. You may rely upon the quality. And her little Bessie comes to school every day, and passes your lodgings. So it would be very easy to send it."

"I'll follow your advice with pleasure," I said; "and I'll go and arrange about it to-morrow. I know Arthur will want a walk."

"You'll find it quite an easy walk—under three miles, I think."

"Well, now that we've settled that point, let me retort your own remark upon yourself. I don't think you're looking quite your best!"

"I daresay not," she replied in a low voice; and a sudden shadow seemed to overspread her face. "I've had some troubles lately. It's a matter about which I've been long wishing to consult you, but I couldn't easily write about it. I'm so glad to have this opportunity!"

"Do you think", she began again, after a minute's silence, and with a visible embarrassment of manner most unusual in her, "that a promise, deliberately and solemnly given, is always binding except, of course, where its fulfillment would involve some actual sin?"

"I ca'n't think of any other exception at this moment," I said. "That branch of casuistry is usually, I believe, treated as a question of truth and untruth—"

"Surely that is the principle?" she eagerly interrupted. "I always thought the Bible-teaching about it consisted of such texts 'lie not one to another'?"

"I have thought about that point," I replied; "and it seems to me that the essence of lying is the intention of deceiving. If you give a promise, fully intending to fulfill it, you are certainly acting truthfully then; and, if you afterwards break it, that does not involve any deception I cannot call it untruthful."

Another pause of silence ensued. Lady Muriel's face was hard to read: she looked pleased, I thought, but also puzzled; and I felt curious to know whether her question had, as I be-

CHAPTER 2 -- LOVE'S CURFEW

gan to suspect, some bearing on the breaking off of her engagement with Captain (now Major) Lindon.

“You have relieved me from a great fear,” she said “but the thing is of course wrong, somehow. What texts would you quote, to prove it wrong?”

“Any that enforce the payment of debts. If A promises something to B, B has a claim upon A. And A’s sin, if he breaks his promise, seems to me more analogous to stealing than to lying.”

“It’s a new way of looking at it—to me,” she said; “but it seems a true way, also. However, I wo’n’t deal in generalities, with an old friend like you! For we are old friends somehow. Do you know, I think we began as old friends?” she said with a playfulness of tone that ill accorded with the tears that glistened in her eyes.

“Thank you very much for saying so,” I replied. “I like to think of you as an old friend,” (“—though you don’t look it!” would have been the almost necessary sequence, with any other lady; but she and I seemed to have long passed out of the time when compliments, or any such trivialities, were possible).

Here the train paused at a station, where two or three passengers entered the carriage; so no more was said till we had reached our journey’s end.

On our arrival at Elveston, she readily adopted my suggestion that we should walk up together; so, as soon as our luggage had been duly taken charge of—hers by the servant who met her at the station, and mine by one of the porters—we set out together along the familiar lanes, now linked in my memory with so many delightful associations. Lady Muriel at once recommenced the conversation at the point where it had been interrupted.

“ You knew of my engagement to my cousin Eric. Did you also hear—”

“Yes,” I interrupted, anxious to spare her the pain of giving any details. “I heard it had all come to an end.”

“I would like to tell you how it happened,” she said; “as that is the very point I want your advice about. I had long realized that we were not in sympathy in religious belief. His ideas of Christianity are very shadowy; and even as to the existence of a God he lives in a sort of dreamland. But it has not affected his life! I feel sure, now, that the most absolute

CHAPTER 2 -- LOVE'S CURFEW

Atheist may be leading, though walking blindfold, a pure and noble life. And if you knew half the good deeds—" she broke off suddenly, and turned away her head.

"I entirely agree with you," I said. "And have we not our Saviour's own promise that such a life shall surely lead to the light?"

"Yes, I know it," she said in a broken voice, still keeping her head turned away. "And so I told him. He said he would believe, for my sake, if he could. And he wished for my sake, he could see things as I did. But that is all wrong!" she went on passionately. "God cannot approve such low motives as that! Still it was not I that broke it off. I knew he loved me; and I had promised; and—"

"Then it was he that broke it off?"

"He released me unconditionally." She faced me again now, having quite recovered her usual calmness of manner.

"Then what difficulty remains?"

"It is this, that I don't believe he did it of his own free will. Now, supposing he did it against his will, merely to satisfy my scruples, would not his claim on me remain just as strong as ever? And would not my promise be as binding as ever? My father says 'no'; but I ca'n't help fearing he is biased by his love for me. And I've asked no one else. I have many friends—friends for the bright sunny weather; not friends for the clouds and storms of life; not old friends like you!"

"Let me think a little," I said: and for some. minutes we walked on in silence, while, pained to the heart at seeing the bitter trial that had come upon this pure and gentle soul, I strove in vain to see my way through the tangled skein of conflicting motives.

"If she loves him truly", (I seemed at last to grasp the clue to the problem) "is not that, for her the voice of God? May she not hope that she is sent to him, even as Ananias was sent to Saul in his blindness, that he may receive his sight. Once more I seemed to hear Arthur whispering What knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? " and I broke the silence with the words "If you still love him truly—"

CHAPTER 2 -- LOVE'S CURFEW

"I do not!" she hastily interrupted. "At least—not in that way. I believe I loved him when I promised, but I was very young: it is hard to know. But, whatever the feeling was, it is dead now. The motive on his side is Love: on mine it is—Duty!"

Again there was a long silence. The whole skein of thought was tangled worse than ever. This time she broke the silence. "Don't misunderstand me!" she said. "When I said my heart was not his, I did not mean it was any one else's! At present I feel bound to him; and, till I know I am absolutely free, in the sight of God, to love any other than him, I'll never even think of any one else—in that way, I mean. I would die sooner!" I had never imagined my gentle friend capable of such passionate utterances.

I ventured on no further remark until we had nearly arrived at the Hall-gate; but, the longer I reflected, the clearer it became to me that no call of Duty demanded the sacrifice—possibly of the happiness of a life—which she seemed ready to make. I tried to make this clear to her also, adding some warnings on the dangers that surely awaited a union in which mutual love was wanting. "The only argument for it, worth considering," I said in conclusion, "seems to be his supposed reluctance in releasing you from your promise. I have tried to give to that argument its full weight, and my conclusion is that it does not affect the rights of the case, or invalidate the release he has given you. My belief is that you are entirely free to act as now seems right."

"I am very grateful to you," she said earnestly. "Believe it, please! I ca'n't put it into proper words!" and the subject was dropped by mutual consent and I only learned, long afterwards, that our discussion had really served to dispel the doubts that had harassed her so long.

We parted at the Hall-gate, and I found Arthur eagerly awaiting my arrival; and, before we parted for the night, I had heard the whole story—how he had put off his journey from day to day, feeling that he could not go away from the place till his fate had been irrevocably settled by the wedding taking place: how the preparations for the wedding, and the excitement in the neighbourhood, had suddenly come to an end, and he had learned (from Major Lindon, who called to wish him good-bye) that the engagement had been broken off by mutual consent: how he had instantly abandoned all his plans for going abroad, and had decided to stay on at Elveston, for a year or two at any rate, till his newly-awakened hopes should prove true or false; and how, since that memorable day, he had avoided all meetings with Lady Muriel, fearing to betray his feelings before he had had any sufficient evidence as to how she regarded him. "But it is nearly six weeks since all that happened," he said in conclusion, "and we can meet in the ordinary way, now, with no need for any

CHAPTER 2 -- LOVE'S CURFEW

painful allusions. I would have written to tell you all this: only I kept hoping from day to day that—that there would be more to tell!”

“And how should there be more, you foolish fellow,” I fondly urged, “if you never even go near her? Do you expect the offer to come from her?”

Arthur was betrayed into a smile. “No,” he said, “I hardly expect that. But I’m a desperate coward. There s no doubt about it!”

“And what reasons have you heard of for breaking off the engagement?”

“A good many,” Arthur replied, and proceeded to count them on his fingers. “First, it was found that she was dying of—something; so he broke it off. Then it was found that he was dying of—some other thing; so she broke it off. Then the Major turned out to be a confirmed gamester; so the Earl broke it off. Then the Earl insulted him; so the Major broke it off. It got a good deal broken off, all things considered!”

“You have all this on the very best authority, of course?”

“Oh, certainly! And communicated in the strictest confidence! Whatever defects Elveston society suffers from want of information isn’t one of them!”

“Nor reticence, either, it seems. But, seriously, do you know the real reason?”

“No, I’m quite in the dark.”

I did not feel that I had any right to enlighten him; so I changed the subject, to the less engrossing one of “new milk”, and we agreed that I should walk over, next day to Hunter’s farm, Arthur undertaking to set me part of the way, after which he had to return to keep a business engagement.