A STORY OF ENGLISH LAW

CHAPTER I.

Catherine Herbert was a young [and rather pretty widow, the mother of one little boy, and the mistress of a handsome house and moderate competence. She was not a coquette ; but left at two-and-twenty the widow of a man whom she had married in obedience to her father's command, a man withal old enough to have been her father himself, it was no wonder that in a year or so after Mr. Herbert's death, neighbours began to speculate upon the probabilities concerning his successor. In something less than another year, they had settled the matter to the general satisfaction ; and before the third was half gone, were becoming impatint to know whether the wedding-day was fixed. Presently it became evident that their conclusions had been premature, and at length gossips grew weary : though 'Mrs Herbert and her lawyer' remained a stock-object of discourse, it was generally understood to have become one of second-rate importance.

To the lady herself it was far otherwise, for though she had not given her heart quite so readily as they might suppose, it certainly *was* given ; no one knew this better than herself, unless, perhaps he had known it before she did : if he had not, most probably he would never have known it at all.

George Stuart—such was his name—was the young partner of an old attorney, in whose hands Mr. Herbert had left his wife's affairs. These proved to be rather complicated, and, as a natural consequence, the lawyer and his client frequently met. Stuart was the working-partner, though not head of the firm ; and Mrs Herbert grew in the habit of looking to him as her adviser, without considering how far this habit might lead her.

It is not easy to say whether Stuart did consider this ; his was not a character easily pronounced upon. Fitted by nature and education to adorn society, he entered it only as often as seemed necessary to avoid the imputation of singularity. Nevertheless, this was the imputation always attached to him, though with what reason few could decide, for he scrupulously avoided every appearance which could have justified it. In dress, manners, habits, and acquirements, he differed nothing from others of his rank ; yet there must have been a difference somewhere, for every one acknowledged, though none could define it. A few suggested, that it arose from his somewhat unusual style of countenance ; others, more justly, considered this not a cause, but an effect.

Why was this an unusual face? Nothing in his features was extraordinary. He had, of course, the usual items, not excepting 'two gray eyes and a chin.' But there was nothing surpassingly handsome in any of them : it was in expression only that his features were remarkable. At first sight, young ladies pronounced him melancholy, young men declared him proud ; but both opinions were qualified on a closer acquaintance. There was an odd mixture of gentleness and sternness in the short, firm curve of his lip : it left one in doubt whether the original character had been harsh or tender. So with his eye ; its cold, hard gaze was tempered by a peculiar softness, and the beholder was puzzled to know which was the natural, which the acquired expression.

To Mrs Herbert, Stuart's manner was always simply respectful. Self-possessed at all times, even cold and taciturn upon occasions, it was entirely without effort he acquired any influence over her. So completely had this indifference beguiled her from the examination of her own feelings, that it was not until she was startled into fearing the loss of his friendship, that she began to understand how highly she had prized it. He, having perhaps more knowledge of the human heart, perceiving long before she did whither all this might tend, and gradually, very gradually, he sought to lessen the danger. His visits became less frequent, his manners more formal. This was the means by which Mrs. Herbert was awakened to the consciousness of her own partiality, and at the same time stung with the belief, that he suspected and scorned it. This last mortification, however, could not endure long, for not the most fastidious delicacy could have detected anything in his bearing towards her which the proudest woman could have resented ; and the deep respect, the almost reverence with which he treated her when they met in general society, soon satisfied her that, whatever his feelings for her might be, contempt certainly was not among them. All this was very tantalising, and some women might have grown weary ; but Catherine Herbert, however much she might feel the bitterness of unrequited affection, could not, if she had wished, have recalled or transferred hers.

But after all, her lot was far from being an unhappy one ; her little son was an admirable security against dulness and solitude. Alas! she knew not how much he had ministered to her happiness, until he was suddenly snatched from her. Stunned by the blow, almost wishing that the cruel fever had taken her too, how bitterly, even without knowing it, did she miss the consolations of sympathy! Life seemed henceforward a blank to her, and yet life must be endured ; for though her health had suffered severely, youth and strength forbade the release that she almost sighed for. And George Stuart, cold, callous, unfeeling as he seemed, what was there in the death of an infant to excite his regret? He scarcely dared to ask himself ; but when he did summon courage to analyse his feelings, the truth was soon arrived at. It is not till misfortune overtakes the object of its love, that a noble mind understands how deep that love has been. The blow that struck her heart communicated itself to his ; and it was in the midst of his sorrow for her bereavement, that he first confessed to himself that he loved her. To himself?—and why not to her? No ; this must not be : cold drops stood on his forehead at the thought.

Some weeks elapsed after her little boy's death ere they met. Stuart was unable wholly to conceal his agitation ; and she, grateful for his evident sympathy, could scarcely control her emotion. Few words were spoken, yet that short interview gave her more pleasure than she had hoped ever again to know. Did he then love her after all? And if so, why did he fear to let her suspect it? What meant that sudden flush, chased again to deadly paleness? Why did his hand so abruptly relinquish hers, unless through the fear that she should detect its trembling? By such inquiries as these—foolish except to a woman—did she beguile many a lonely hour away. But something else was in store for her.

She had been from home for several weeks, visiting a distant relative, when, on returning, she was informed that Mr. Stuart had called once, and his aged partner twice, in her absence. She wondered at this, for Mr. Morgan rarely took so much interest in her affairs as this proceeding seemed to indicate. It was, in fact, owing to Stuart's earnest request that he had called, Stuart becoming daily more convinced of the necessity for his absenting himself.

It was an unlucky move on his part. Mrs Herbert, fancying that the business must be of importance, called at the office the morning after her return. Both partners were absent, but expected momentarily; and Mrs. Herbert seated herself to await their coming. On a table beside her lay a heap of unopened letters, and she began mechanically to remark the different appearance of each. There were parcels of documents, addressed in the round stiff hand which betokened their legal import; large letters in blue envelopes, with immense seals ; smaller ones in delicate cream colour, with arms and crest emblazoned thereon. All these bore the address of the firm, but one, the last which Mrs Herbert took up, was simply inscribed to 'G. Stuart, Esq.'

Now, there was nothing very strange in this. Mrs Herbert knew that private letters were seldom if ever addressed to the office, and most probably the writer of this had erred through inadvertence. But some strange thought must have flitted through Mrs Herbert's brain, for she stood for some moments gazing at the paper in her hand, as if everything else in the world was forgotten. Suddenly she heard the outer door open ; and hastily replacing the letter as she had found it, with the address downwards, she flung down her veil and walked to the window.

It was Stuart himself who entered, but Mr. Morgan was scarcely a step behind him. After a quiet greeting, Stuart passed on to the table where the letters lay, and Mr. Morgan proceeded to inform his visitor of the business on which he had wished to see her. Fortunately, he required only assenting answers, and these Mrs Herbert contrived to give, though her attention was otherwise occupied. Mr. Morgan left her to fetch some document from the outer office ; and, glad of the relief, she drew aside her veil to breathe more freely. Stuart's hand was on the letter, the *lady's* letter, and he opened it without observing the address. A strange look shot across his countenance, as the spread sheet met his eye ; a look of anger and detestation, subdued at once into scornful pity. But Catherine Herbert knew not what that look expressed ; she saw only that it betokened some strong emotion, and the rush of feeling deprived her of the power to think. Her eyes closed involuntarily, but only for a moment ; she *would not* faint ; and reopening them, she saw his fixed upon her with a look so eloquent of overwhelming anguish, that all thought of herself was in a moment eclipsed.

By what strange alchemy is it, that in the breast of a true woman the wildest passions are sometimes instantaneously converted into the most gentle? It is not love alone—it is faith : the pure full trustfulness of an undeceived, undeceiving spirit. Stuart's look of agony was met by one of love. At that moment, Catherine would not have scrupled to confess it, though never till that moment had she felt it so entirely hopeless. The impulse of jealousy was swallowed up in that of generous affection ; and the grateful brightness that started into Stuart's eyes shewed that he understood and appreciated her feeling.

Yes, he understood all. At sight of the letter, which to him possessed a fearful interest, he had involuntarily glanced at Mrs. Herbert. The change in her countenance told him how she had interpreted his, and to his own painful emotions was added this of observing hers. There was another feeling too more selfish perhaps, but equally natural—the dread of losing her esteem. It was this she read in his face ; to this her look gave answer. Men know not the strength of a woman's love, when they suppose that any one shock, no matter how violent, can materially alter it.

Mr. Morgan returned in a very few minutes; little did he know the change those minutes had wrought in that silent couple! They were, to all appearance, just as he had left them—they had not spoken ; and though Stuart's heart might be groaning within him, though Mrs. Herbert's lips might be whiter now than her cheeks had been before, Mr. Morgan saw it not. The veil, the thick black veil, was down again ; and by the time he had finished his explanations, she had regained her self-command.

The remainder of that day she spent rather sadly. Bidding her servants deny her to every one, she shut herself into her chamber, and indulged in a passion of weeping ; yet her tears were not those of unmixed sorrow. There is no nook so small, but hope will find a way through it ; and whatever might be the mystery which encircled Stuart, Catherine was satisfied, that it arose from misfortune rather than error.

She was right : but this seemed to afford little consolation to him, as, pacing up and down his chamber, he wore away the night. It was long ere he could think : the strong discipline to which he had for years subjected himself was for once powerless ; the tumult of his feelings defied all government. Ah, it is easy to bear our own griefs ; but the sufferings of those we love it is impossible to see and remain unmoved ! Night wasted ; day dawned, and still his line of action was unchosen.

CHAPTER II.

George Stuart sat at his desk, little inclined for business, but less for anything else. Fortunately, it was mere routine-work he had to attend to, until Mr. Morgan came in. They were in a private office and alone.

'George,' said the old man, 'you don't look quite yourself to-day. Suppose you shut this up, and take a walk.'

'Where?' Stuart knew that his walk was to be on business.

Mr. Morgan told him. There was a client to be called on in one street, and a deed to be inquired after in another. Lastly, Mrs Herbert must be informed, that her mortgage on a certain cottage was worth next to nothing, inasmuch as it had been previously mortgaged to its full value.

Stuart sat still for some moments, and then coldly and briefly excused himself from the proposed walk.

But his partner was not to be so put off. At first, he jested at Stuart's cowardice, wondered at his fastidiousness, and so on; but perceiving that his badinage was more likely to disgust than to amuse, he changed his tone, and seriously, but very kindly, begged to be informed of the reason of his friend's refusal.

Now, George Stuart was not a man to be questioned on his own affairs, and to any other person he might have replied coldly or disdainfully ; perhaps he would not have replied at all ; but for Mr. Morgan he had a real respect, which was well merited. During the four or five years of their partnership, the young man had been treated by the elder one with uniform kindness and delicacy. If now the latter seemed to be overstepped, George knew well that it was only an excess of the former feeling which occasioned the trespass. So, instead of that impenetrable look of distance by which common inquirers are repelled, he half smiled as he answered :

'It is not always possible to give a reason for our likings or dislikings. It is not enough to say, that I feel disinclined to walk?'

Mr. Morgan shook his head, and laughed a little. 'Come, George ; be open with me. How has she vexed you?'

This was too blunt. Stuart looked angry ; but in a minute or two replied gently : 'You are mistaken, my good friend. I cannot pretend not to understand you ; but you are altogether wrong.'

'I am sorry for that, George. I fear that others have mistaken also.'

Stuart looked up, and encountered a grave, almost disapproving look, which he returned somewhat proudly, and rose from his seat.

'Don't be angry, George. Sit down. I thought you took me for a friend?'

'You have shown yourself one,' replied Stuart, grasping the hand which Mr. Morgan held out to him ; 'But'——

'But you will not give me a friendly confidence? Come, George, I have watched you for some time, and I cannot help thinking that you are using poor, pretty Mrs Herbert rather badly.'

Coming at such a moment, this was a bitter accusation. It was too much for Stuart's overwrought feelings, which could not take refuge in indignation : the kind gentleness of his friend's manner rendered that impossible. He sat down ; but when he would have spoken, the convulsive trembling of his lip forbade it. For a moment his head was turned aside, and his hand pressed his forehead ; then the strong will reasserted its mastery, and he calmly crossed his arms upon his chest, while his lip curled, as if disdaining the emotion he had lately exhibited.

'Forgive me, George,' said Mr Morgan, a good deal startled at seeing how much pain he had inflicted. 'I had no wish to annoy you. I will say no more.'

It is not strange that often something which we deemed an annoyance should at the moment of its removal become precious in our eyes? Stuart had been inexpressibly annoyed at Mr. Morgan's inquisition, yet now he felt a sort of disappointment. Besides, was he not leaving him under a false impression, though perhaps somewhat altered from the original one? With a strong effort, he requested his friend to stay.

'Resume your catechism, my dear sir,' he said, 'and I will answer you faithfully up to a certain point. Beyond that I cannot go.'

Mr Morgan twirled his gloves, scarcely knowing what to say.

'Well,' Stuart persisted, 'will you begin?'

'Why, my dear fellow, you puzzle me excessively. I *was* inclined to charge you with coldness and want of feeling.'

'That is nothing new,' said Stuart, with a look half sad, half scornful : 'that has been my imputed character for years.'

'But in this particular case, George! To come to the point at once : I am sure you liked Mrs. Herbert once.'

'I have always highly esteemed the lady you mention.'

'You could not, then, intend to shew her disrespect.'

'Disrespect! What can you mean?'

'Have you not to-day, for the third time, declined seeing her? Supposing this were known, what would be the impression produced? I fear, one more favorable to your fastidiousness than to her delicacy.'

'You may be right,' Stuart replied after a while ; 'neverth'less, I could only do as I have done. Of two evils, I have chosen the least.'

'Explain yourself.,

'It is not easy to do so. I felt it my duty to break off an intercourse which might perhaps'———

'I understand. But why your duty?'

Stuart was silent.

'Excuse me, Are you "set" against marrying?'

'My dear friend, you have reached the point at which I told you that your questions or my answers must cease.'

Mr Morgan looked disappointed and sorry.

'My confidence would only give you pain, Mr. Morgan,' said Stuart, replying to the look.

'Then you will not tell me? You will not let me know, what this is that burdens your heart and shadows your countenance—that is crossing your forehead with wrinkles, and streaking your hair with grey!'

Half smiling, yet sadly, Mr. Morgan rose from his seat. Stuart rose too, and walked to the window ; then, after some moments' reflection, he turned again with a firm though slow movement, and walked back to his seat.

His story was soon told : he made but a simple statement of a few sad facts, leaving his hearer's imagination to fill up the outline. Even so let me tell what he told : few words will suffice. He had loved unwiseiy, married rashly ; had trusted first, to doubt afterwards; had wondered, feared, suspected. Alas for the suspicion which cannot be allayed, except as ti has been! Not long had he to endure suspense. Conviction forced itself upon him, and the sunshine of his life was ended.

He had loved, I said, unwisely, for the living object of his love was not like the ideal. With the enthusiasm of boyhood, he had attributed to her all the virtues he wished her to possess, and believed that her love for the noble and the good was as ardent as his own. Oh how many heart-wrung tears, how many hours of unknown anguish, do these crushed hopes and deadened aspirations cost us!

In low tones, with eyes bent to the ground, Stuart and his friend conversed.

'Where is she now? asked Mr. Morgan.

Stuart told him.

'And how does she subsist?'

Stuart explained that he had made arrangements for her receiving a small annuity, on condition that she never in any manner intruded herself upon him. The letter he had received lately was a breach of that agreement.

'Does she write as a penitent, George?'

'Simply as a person transacting business.'

He gave the letter to Mr. Morgan, who perused it carefully, and on laying it down muttered half aloud : 'And almost seeming to think herself the injured party!—You never sued?' he asked a moment afterwards : 'you never sought a divorce?'

'No.'

'Why did you not?'

'There were several reasons,' said Stuart evasively.

'The exposure?'

'Ay, who likes to see himself and his wrongs in the hands of every newspaper editor?—at the mercy of every idler who