

A BITTER BIRTHRIGHT;

OR, LADY GILMORE'S TEMPTATION,

BY DORA RUSSELL,

AUTHOR OF

"FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW," "THE BROKEN SEAL," "THE TRACK OF THE STORM," Etc.

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CHAPTER XXII.—THE STRANGER SON.

The next morning about half-past nine o'clock, just as Gerard for the first time that day went to the farmhouse door, and stood for a moment or two on the threshold with his hands in his pockets, thinking of the future which now lay before him, he suddenly perceived the tall, even, manly form of Father Hayward approaching him.

"You will write?" she whispered, with her hand on his breast.

"I will write to-morrow," he answered, "and to each other and to the rest of the world."

"I am not sure I can't," answered Gerard decisively. "I could leave here in the afternoon perhaps."

"But then we could not reach Wrothlesley to-day, which I am most anxious to do, and the day following I could be so much consequence, as that you should see your mother without delay, so let me urge you to put every other consideration aside."

"But Gerard still hesitated; he would see May Summers before he went, he was determined; but finally Father Hayward broke down when the moment of parting came, and sobbed aloud when Gerard bent down to kiss her.

"I am sure he will not forget his kind nurse who has tended him all these years," said Gerard, "and I think all probability also Mrs. Brewster will be called to Wrothlesley to substantiate Gerard's claims."

"Of course, I won't forget you," said Gerard, once more shaking her hand, "good-bye, take care of yourself, like a good old woman, until I come back."

"I thought to have him by me to close my eyes in death," she moaned; "but now it is all over; he's gone away and will never come back."

"In the meanwhile, Gerard and the priest were walking towards the village door, from which they drove in a carriage to the nearest railway station.

"He had been naturally much gossiped about the servants on the subject, but until Gerard arrived he had not spoken of it to any of them."

"Now, however, she broke the silence." "Graham," she said addressing him, "you saw the gentleman who arrived with Father Hayward to-night, of whom does his face remind you?"

"I remember the melancholy occasion perfectly, my lady," he replied.

"That coffin was an empty one, I deceived his father and pretended he had died, because my lord ardently wished his other son to be the heir, as this poor child was a hunchback. But he did not die, and has been reared by Nurse Brewster, and now he has come home."

"Her voice broke and faltered as she alluded again to 'the other son,' and Graham bowed respectfully as he listened.

"It is very strange my lady," he said, "if you could have knocked me over with a feather the moment my eyes fell on his face to-night, the likeness to his late lordship is so strong. Am I to understand, my lady, that we have now to address him as Lord Gilmore?"

"Certainly, as Lord Gilmore; I have called you here to tell you this, and I request you to make it known in the household steps will be taken immediately to have his title acknowledged, for no one can dispute it; Nurse Brewster will be here to-morrow, and then everyone shall know."

said as he rather regretfully cut off the lock, "and now, darling, let me have a piece of this pretty stuff."

"And May was not afraid of injuring her hair, and so let Gerard take as much as he wished. Her heart indeed felt too full at the thought of Gerard going away from her to care for anything else, even when he took her in his arms to bid her good-bye it was all she could do to restrain her tears."

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"What sort of fellow is my brother?" asked Gerard, delighted with the butler's remarks.

"He's a very pleasant, free-handed young gentleman, and good-looking also, but does not take after his father as much as you do, my lord; in fact, it is just wonderful."

So Gerard went to bed, and was gratified, and for a long time he did not sleep peacefully, his unfamiliar dream.

And when he awoke in the morning he could not at first tell where he was, he sat up, rubbed his eyes, and then, as he came back to him, he was Lord Gilmore; all this splendour was his, the butler had said he was like his handsome father, and Gerard's vain heart loved to think this.

He got up and looked out of the window; looked on the wide spreading park with its green slopes and groups of stately trees, below which the deep browed in the sheltered glades. He could see that a great beam of light was in his marble terrace and fountains, and in the far vista a gleam of the shining waters of the lake. Wrothlesley was looking beautiful in the sweet springtime with its fresh-opened leaves and blossoms, beneath a blue white-flecked sky, and a bright shining sun in the east.

"The wrong to you must be undone," she said in a low tone. "did you bring Nurse Brewster with you?"

"No," said Father Hayward, "but I brought with me her deposition, confirming in every particular your statement."

"But that is not enough!" exclaimed Lady Gilmore excitedly. "Nurse Brewster must come here and declare before the whole household, before my other son, before their guests, and before we did. This is Lord Gilmore and everyone must know it!"

"I can telegraph for Mrs. Brewster to-morrow," answered Father Hayward soothingly; "but would it not be wise for you, so much as you are, and my young friend here, I am sure, is greatly in need of some refreshments; and the good father kindly laid his hand on Gerard's shoulder."

"Come to me then, Gerard," said Lady Gilmore again stretching out her hand, which he took, "my son whom I have wronged so deeply, stoop down that I may kiss your face."

And Gerard bent down, and she kissed him with her quivering lips.

"God has spared me to atone to you," she said solemnly, "say again your forgiveness?"

"Yes, indeed I do," answered Gerard, heartily, for he was touched by his mother's words; and again Lady Gilmore kissed him; kissed the face she had last touched when he was a little babe.

CHAPTER XXIII.—THE NEW LORD.

Gerard awoke next morning with a confused sense of not knowing where he was; awoke and looked around him, and saw instead of the neat, homely furniture at Cascade farmhouse, a room the fittings of which were extremely luxurious. Lady Gilmore had given orders that her son was to occupy one of the state bedrooms of the castle, and thither the night before, Graham the butler had escorted him. Graham knew by this time who Gerard really was, and had had no time in courting the rising sun.

Scarcely indeed had Gerard and Father Hayward retired from her presence, when Lady Gilmore summoned this old family servant to her side. Graham had been in the castle at the time when the small empty coffin supposed to contain the little lord's body, had been interred in the family vault, and he had heard rumors also that this had lately been opened in the presence of a magistrate, Father Hayward and a London lawyer. There had been naturally much gossip among the servants on the subject, but until Gerard arrived he had not spoken of it to any of them."

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"He was an uncommon handsome man," went on the butler, "and your

lordship is his very image, far more like than the other gentleman—Mr. Hugh that now is."

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