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A LOVE STORY.

I.

"Now hush, my dearie, hush, there's a man! Your mother is a poor creature, but she can take care of her little lad yet, and she *will*. It will never be *she* that will sit by and see him thrashed,—not for all the Langtons and all the book-learning in England!"

The speaker sat in her cottage kitchen, in an arm-chair by the fireside, plaiting straw; a feeble, sickly-looking woman, with a querulous face. She had fretted herself into ill health two years ago when her husband died, John Morton, the Brent fisherman, who had lost his life one wild night coming home round the headland with his laden boat; and she was never likely, with her indolent and repining nature, to be anything but an invalid now for the rest of her days.

On a stool at her feet sat the boy whose unmerited whipping she bewailed—a small child disfigured by abundant weeping. The room had also one other occupant, a dark-eyed girl of nineteen or twenty, who sat by the window, sewing.

She sat sewing, but she let her work drop down upon her knees as Mrs. Morton spoke, and raised a face that was full of a strange kind of pain.

"Mother," she said, in a low intense tone, "I could not help it."

"You didn't try to help it," Mrs. Morton retorted, quickly. "You wouldn't care if Langton broke every bone in his body,—as he nearly *has* done,—bad luck to his ugly face," she cried bitterly.

"Mother, hush!"

As Mrs. Morton spoke those last words the girl's eyes had flashed, and her fingers had contracted almost convulsively.

And yet few others—men or women—in the parish would have been much concerned at a far greater amount of vituperation passed upon Philip Langton; few who had had any dealings with him would have been disposed to stand up warmly in his defence. He was not a popular man in Brent.

He had come to the place a year ago to be master of the village school,—the rector's shool, as it was called. High testimonials had procured him the appointment, nor indeed was his abilities ever questioned; *they* were all that could be desired, and more than were needed for the post. He was found, however, to be violent-tempered, haughty, reserved, independent, and he soon got an ill name alike with rector and scholars.

He had been born and brought up as a gentleman. His father and mother had died when he was a child; at eighteen he had quarrelled with the uncle under whose guardianship he had been brought up, and utterly without resources of his own, had left his house, and from that time to this his life had been a restless battle and struggle. He was clever, ambitious, determined,—and friendless. In twelve years, spite of his talents, he had risen to no higher post than this humble one of village schoolmaster.

In the same school at Brent, three months after the arrival of Mr. Langton, Margaret Morton had been appointed mistress. She was young to hold such a post but since her father's death the support both of her mother and brother had fallen almost entirely upon her; and this circumstance, when the place became vacant last winter, had given her, in the estimation of the kindhearted rector, a strong claim to the appointment. She had besides been monitress in the school for some years; she was a good girl, too, and clever; the rector liked her, and before she had occupied her new post for a month it became clear that the whole school was of one feeling with him.

I say she was clever. In a very short time Philip Langton discovered that. Presently, moved, I suppose by some feeling of kindness, he offered, if she cared for it, to help her to advance her studies. Perhaps she too had some ambition, some desire to be at a future time more than a village school-teacher. Be that as it may, she accepted his offer, and she had now been his pupil for six months. He found her quick, earnest, and trusting; repaying that trust, he had made himself to her patient, unwearied and gentle. Master and pupil suited each other.

It was evening, seven o'clock on a June day. The school had long been cleared of its throng of children; books and slates were put away in their places; the brick floor was clean swept. At the girls' room the door was locked, but the boys' room was still open, and alone at the master's desk stood Mr Langton, a thin, slight man, with a dark, resolute face, by no means prepossessing or handsome.

He used to give Margaret lessons usually about this hour, and he was waiting for her now. To-day, however, he had to wait a quarter of an hour or more before she came. When she did come at last, he was writing, and only raised his head for a moment as he heard her step.

"You are late," was all he said.

"Yes; I was detained a little while at home."

She had brought out her books and arranged them before he moved from his desk. Coming at length in silence, he drew a seat beside her, and took the open book out of her hands.

"What have you prepared?"

"Those two pages."

He began to question her upon them, forthwith. She could usually answer what he asked her, readily; to-day, however, her thoughts were evidently wandering. He tried more than once to fix her attention, but still, in spite of that, the lesson was ill said.

He put down the book at last.

"You are not well to-day?" he asked.

"O yes, I am well," she said, quickly.

"What are you thinking of, then? Not of your lesson?"

"No." She hesitated a moment.

"Tell me."

"I wanted to speak to you, Mr. Langton," she said suddenly. "You were very angry with my brother this morning."

"Well?"

"You hurt him very much."

"I meant to hurt him."

"He is very young."

"Young or old, he did *wrong*."

There was a pause. Mr. Langton sat forward, leaning his dark face on his hand.

"Well?" he said again.

Her eyes had fallen. When he questioned her, they looked back to his face; she began to speak again, and gradually as she spoke her cheek flushed hot and bright.

"Could you not be a little gentler with them,—a little less angry with them when they do wrong? I know that Tom deserved to be punished to-day; but—if you could be a little gentler! When you are angry every one misunderstands you. O, Mr. Langton!" she cried, "you do not know half what is said against you!"

The tears had sprung up into her eyes; her earnest distress had filled her face with a look almost of passion.

"I cannot attend to all the fools' tongues in Brent," was his scornful answer. "Stand *you* by me, and they may talk as they please."

"But could you not bear a little with them?" she pleaded timidly. "Mr. Langton, you must not think that they can do you no harm. They can harm you; they send every complaint they have against you to the rectory. They are saying already,"—the poor girl's voice almost broke down,—"they are saying already that you will not be much longer here."

"Ah? are they saying that?" and he laughed.

She gave him one sad look, and then dropped her head, and spoke no more. Her clasped hands lay on her lap; presently as she sat, large tears fell down and wet them. She never moved; he also sat motionless. She thought he did not know she was weeping, but she was wrong there; he was conscious of every tear she shed.

Quietly watching her, he let the silence last for several minutes; then bending to her at last, he said these words:

"If it comes to that,—if I am not to be here much longer,—Margaret, will you let me leave Brent as poor as when I came?"

She started as he spoke, but she neither replied to him or raised her head. He did not withdraw his look from her; after a few moments he spoke again.

"I have loved no woman before. You are my first love, Margaret. Will you be my wife?"

She answered him then.

"What am I that you should ask me this?" she said, in an agitated voice. "I am nothing but a poor, ignorant girl. O no—no—!" she cried. "Your wife must not be one like me!"

"Margaret!" he said.

She had not looked up till then, but at that call, as if its passionate tenderness compelled her, she raised her face. What need was there to speak again? By her two hands he drew her near to him, and took her in his arms.

II.

They told no one of their engagement, for they knew the outcry that would on all hands follow its discovery, and no one suspected it. For three months they were both infinitely happy.

Even in the school during these months there was improvement. Margaret's power over Mr. Langton was great; one word or one look from her, one touch of her hand, could subdue him in his angriest and haughtiest moods; and, rendered pliable for his love for her, he strove, and often strove successfully, to bend his pride and curb his temper. Thus, for a time, all things went wonderfully well. But this hollow kind of peace was not a thing to last. Margaret could not be always by his side, or in his sight; and one day at length in an unlucky hour, suddenly, without warning, the three months' tranquility expired.

Mr. Langton quarreled with the rector. The rector was really wrong in the ground of quarrel, and Philip right; but Philip, in his indignation, forgot all deference due to him as his employer, stood up before him as equal to equal, and the end of the days' business was, that when the school-house was closed in the afternoon, the key of it went into the rector's pocket.

He had written the sentence of their separation. Margaret knew that, but she did not reproach him. They met together that evening for the last time at the foot of a cliff beside the sea, which had witnessed many a meeting of their's before, with the calm wide water stretching from their feet.

"It must have come sooner or later," he said. "Do not grieve so for it, my darling. I was wasting time here. My going now will only bring me back to you the sooner."

She looked up wistfully to his face.

"The future is all so dark," she cried; "we cannot see into it. I feel as if I was holding the last link of a golden chain; and to-night—to-night before I sleep—it will have fallen from me."

"No; it will *not* have fallen!" he answered, cheerfully. "Your hand grasping one end, mine holding fast the other, it will remain stretched out between us until the hour that I come back. Margaret I will work for you; I will struggle for you; I will rise for you. And *you*," he cried "wait for me! for no power, but the power of God taking my life, shall keep me from coming back."

"I will wait," she said. "I will wait years and years. If you die before I ever see you again I will wait for you till we meet in heaven."

III.

She did wrong to keep their engagement from her mother. Poor Margaret knew that, and was troubled by the knowledge, but she had not courage to awaken the storm of abuse which she knew well would fall upon her head should she divulge it, so she let time pass on, and told her mother nothing. She kept her secret for two years, hearing from her love occasionally, but not often, and living on her silent trust in him.

After these two years were ended, one day, a bright summer afternoon, Mrs. Morton stood at her cottage door, shading her eyes from the strong sunlight as she looked eagerly toward the school-house, whence the school-children were coming pouring out and swarming down the road, and whence presently, with a step that was slower than theirs, came Margaret. Mrs. Morton's tongue was loosed as she drew near.

"O, dear me! what a time that school does keep you!" she ejaculated. "Such a state as I've been in all day; my poor head's just worn out with thinking. Margaret, you never will guess as long as you live, but what *do* you think the postman brought me here this morning?"

"What, mother?" As she spoke Margaret's whole face flushed.

"O, you may well ask what. I tell you you'll never guess. Why he brought a letter from your uncle Tom, in America,—who might have been dead and buried, for anything I've known, these five years,—and he's sent us money to go out to him. Yes, he says we're to go out to him, every one of us, and he'll keep us as long as we live. Why, Margaret!" Mrs. Morton cried. "Margaret! God bless the girl, are you going to faint?"

"Mother, come in. Mother, come in and shut the door."

White and trembling, Margaret passed into the kitchen. She let her mother join her there, and grasping her hands tight within her own, she began to speak hurriedly, in a low, constrained, almost hard tone.

"Mother, I cannot go; I cannot leave England," she said. "If you go, you must go alone. No—no—don't look like that at me. *I* have had news, too, to-day. O, mother!" she cried, all hardness suddenly breaking down as she clasped Mrs. Morton's hands upon her breast, "speak gently to me, look kindly on me. Dear mother! dear mother! I am going to be Philip Langton's wife."

Mrs. Morton stood before her daughter, face to face, and caught her by the arms.

"You are going to be *what?*" burst from her lips. "Going to be *what?*" she cried.

"I am going to be his wife." Her answer came almost triumphantly now. "I promised him long before he went. He wrote to me to day to tell me that he could marry me. And he is coming!" she cried, the light flushing up in her face.

It was the last flash of gladness that lighted that poor face for many a day to come. Margaret had told her secret, and what followed was a storm of tears and passionate reproaches so violent as to exhaust all the small stock of strength that Mrs. Morton had, and force her, before many hours were over to her bed, where she lay and sobbed and moaned all night, and by morning had worn herself ill enough to make Margaret unable to leave the house. Throughout the whole day, from morning to night, her daughter sat beside her, listening to her reproaches, and her self-bewailings, and her passionate entreaties. For years past, indeed for well nigh her whole life long, Mrs. Morton had been very well aware that her strength lay in her fretful pertinacity and her deadness to every other creature's comfort but her own. In former days she had ruled her husband by her querulous selfishness; for years she had ruled her daughter by the same means; selfishness was to her her armor of proof, and she had resorted to it in countless straits before, so she resorted to it now. Margaret had worked for her, and devoted herself to her, and humored her, and Mrs. Morton felt that it would be hard now to do without this filial care; and feeling this, whatever a generous and noble nature could least bear to have itself accused of these things did the mother launch at her daughter's head. She hung herself as a dead weight round Margaret's neck, and then, ringing her hands, called every one to witness how Margaret was about to throw her mother off.

For two days Margaret bore this persecution almost in silence, sitting hour after hour by her mother's side, with her poor heart growing cold and faint within her. What should she do? They were all against her,—mother, brother, friends; she had no one to take her part, no one,—not a single one,—to utter Philip Langton's name except with abuses or reproach. What should she do? Hour after hour for those two weary days the poor girl's desolate passionate question went up to Heaven

And slowly and relentlessly, as these hours went on, the hope that had been her torch so long paled and died out. She fought for two days, and then the battle ended. When the evening of the second day came she knew that she must give him up.

She must give him up,—her love!—her life! She was sitting when the struggle ended by her mother's side, who, worn out with forty-eight hour's of fretting, was lying at last with closed eyes and shut lips. She had lain so for half an hour, her thin face shrunk, her pale cheeks hollowed with those two days' illness, and for half an hour Margaret had sat and watched her. Sat in the deep silence,—the first moments of peace that had been given her,—and watched her as she lay there, sickly and feeble and lonely, till a conviction arose within her heart that conquered her,—a despairing, hopeless conviction,—that she *dared* not leave her.

She sat when it had come, and rocked herself to and fro, crouching her head, putting out her hands and covering her face, moaning over and over again some low unintelligible, broken-hearted words. She never changed sound or movement till Mrs. Morton's querulous voice broke on her misery. She only changed them then to raise her white face to her mother, and strive to utter words which at her first effort choked her and would not come.

And when at last, kneeling by the bedside, with her face pressed upon her outstretched hands, the poor girl uttered them, giving her broken-hearted promise that she would go, for her reward there came this answer:

"Could you not have said as much at the beginning," Mrs. Morton said, "without doing your best to kill me first? But you are still as you have been all your life,—thinking of no creature in the world except yourself."

IV.

The promise was given, and from that time onward she was altogether passive. The chief object of every one about her was to hurry her away before Philip Langton could hear that she was going. She knew this but she never said a word. Living as they did they only needed a few days to make their preparations for departure. The rector promised, without detaining Margaret, to find a substitute for her in school. By the end of the week they were all in readiness to go.

She sat, on the last night, in her own room alone. Through all the week poor Langton's unanswered letter had laid upon her heart. To-night she wrote to him

Like one whom sorrow had stunned into insensibility, she told him all that had been done; she told him of the promise she had given, almost without one demonstration of emotion. And only then, when all was said, suddenly at some stray thought—the chance recalling of a few words uttered long before—all the great agony of heart burst forth.

"Do you remember" she said, "that evening when we parted, how I told you that I felt as if I had hold of the last link of a chain?"

And then—

"What am I to do?" she broke out wildly. "O my God! what am I to do? How am I to live all my life long alone. O Philip, help me! Philip have mercy on me! write me one word, or I shall die. O, if I could have seen you once more—only once more—only once more before I go! All day long,—all night, as I lie awake, I think of it. O, Philip! write to me and forgive me, or my heart will break."

She had been in her new home for a month when the answer to that appeal was brought to her. A hard and cruel answer. This was what it said:

"I trusted all my happiness to you, and you have wrecked it. From this I give you *no* forgiveness. From your solemn promise to become my wife,—from your solemn promise to wait for me till I should come and claim you,—no power on earth had the right to set you free. You have broken those promises of your own weak choice and will. Had I been by your side you had not dared to do this wrong to me. If you had been faithful I would have loved you as never living man will love you now. I would have cherished you as never man will cherish you. You have chosen your own lot apart from me. And I—"

The letter broke off here. To this last blank desolate line there was added nothing but the passionate bitter cry,—"Margaret! Margaret!"

A pleasant room, with windows opening to a terrace, and, beyond, a garden sloping to the sea. A summer day in southern latitudes.

"And so after all these years," cried a lady reclining on a cushioned sofa, "Henry Fitzgibbon has come back again."

"Ay, he has come at last."

"I am so curious to see him. We must go early, Mr. Trevers, and have a talk with him before the other people come. And with regard to the girls, Miss Morton," Mrs. Travers raised herself a little, and turned her head,—"as my sister likes you to be early, you had better join us about eight."

At the far end of the room Margaret Morton sits writing, with a cheek that nine years have paled, and a figure that their hands has made more slight. All the rounded comeliness of former days is gone; and yet the calm, refined, strong face is beautiful now with a beauty it never possessed of old. The dreary eyes have a deep, tender look in them, sometimes sad, oftener composed and cheerful; for she has wrought her way out of that great anguish of her youth, and it shades her years now only with a silent and subdued sadness, not any longer with passionate sorrow and revolt.

Yet the *love* that caused that bitter suffering has been the leading star,—the refining element of her life. Its influence has led her in everything that she has done,—in everything that she has struggled to become. She has been true to it in her whole heart and being, in spite of Philip's injustice, in spite of her own renunciation.

She has risen to the position of a governess in a merchant's family. Hither and thither her lot has led her, during these nine years, over that wide American continent. She is now in a pleasant Southern town on the coast of Florida. She is all alone in the world. The kind uncle who brought her over is dead; the sickly mother dead, too, a year ago: her brother, the only one remaining, is a fortune-seeker in California.

"You will be at my sister's at eight o'clock," Mrs. Travers said: and at eight o'clock Margaret and her two pupils sat in Mrs. Maurice's drawing room.

She sat before a side table strewn with books, and whiled the time away in turning them over. There were a few small groups of ladies in the room, making a faint buzz of conversation, but it was not loud enough to interrupt her. For a long while she read undisturbed, until the feeble buzz at last leapt into quicker animation, for the drawing-room door was opened, and new voices sounded, and new faces entered and filled the room.

A few feet from where she sat there stood a small empty sofa. Toward this there presently came two persons, and took possession of it—Mrs. Travers, and a gentleman whose face was strange to Margaret. As they sat down it was he who spoke first.

"Begin with your own marriage, and tell me everything," he said. "What has become of all my old friends?" I can scarcely see or hear of one of them."

"I can give you a score of histories," she answered. "Who shall I begin with?" And they fell at once in an animated talk together.

It might have lasted perhaps for half an hour, when, after a momentary pause, Margaret heard these words:

"In the midst of all this," Mrs. Traver's companion said, "how in the world have you contrived to be so little changed? To look at you I can scarcely believe that I have ever been away; yet the whole morning I have been complaining to Langton that I cannot recognize a single face I see."

She looked up with an involuntary start, but it was only for a moment. She had heard strangers called by that name before. There were more Langtons in the world than hers.

"By the way," Mrs. Travers said, "who *is* this Mr. Langton? Where did you pick him up?"

"Langton? O, he is a man with some name in political circles in England. He is just now secretary to Lord ——"

"He is not in the room at present, is he? I am so blind,—but I don't see him."

"No; he and Travers got into a discussion together, and we left them to fight it out.

They turned the talk back to their own affairs. With a low sigh Margaret stooped her face again upon her book. "It is not Philip, it is not Philip," she whispered to herself. Bending her head she shaded her eyes, and for a minute closed their lids; and before her attitude was altered, before her eyes were reopened there fell upon her ear the long unheard voice.

"How beautiful your open sea here is," it said. "It brings to my mind the only place where I ever lived before by the open sea,—a little village in the south of England."

She looked up and saw him. That vision that nine years had robbed her of; that lover whose memory her life, with all its struggles, successes, endurances, had been an offering. There, before her his foot within a pace of where she sat, his dark, familiar face clear within her sight; familiar, and yet how strange after this absence, this silence, this abnegation of nine years.

A hand was laid kindly on her arm and on her ear came the tones of another voice:

"You feel this room very hot," it said. "Do you not, Miss Morton? I am sure you are hot, you look so pale and tired. Come away with me, and let us take a little walk upon the terrace."

The outstretched hand drew her from her seat. O, this was cruel! There leapt up to her lips one piteous cry, one helpless cry of passionate resistance, and then she rose and went. Away she went, from where her hungry eyes had rested, to the dimly lighted terrace.

"Now take my arm, we will walk for a little while here."

She answered "Yes," but she could not do it. She tried, and walked a dozen steps; then suddenly stood still, and cried:

"Let me sit down."

She leant against a pillar near her.

"Mrs. Carlton, let me sit down! Here, where it is not light?" she cried.

"My dear, there is no seat; stand still one moment."

Pausing to ask no question, Mrs. Carlton hurried to the house. She was absent for a few seconds; then she returned, and not alone. Another arm was laden with the chair she had gone to find, and another hand set it by Margaret's side.

"Thank you, Mr. Langton. Now, my dear, sit down. You will be better soon in this fresh air."

She sat down as she was bidden; helplessly, without a word. She gave no thanks.

Having come, he stayed. Deliberately and at once he took the place where she had stood, and leant where she had leant against the pillar. He stood with his face partly towards her, with the light upon it.

"We shall never teach this northern snowdrop to bear our southern warmth," Mrs. Carlton said. "Mr. Langton, are all your countrywomen so hard to accustom to new climates? Are they all such fragile creatures as this one?"

He turned his head where Margaret sat, and looked at her. Following that look there came no change upon his face, no token in him of recognition, nothing but this quiet answer.

"You are used to a warmer coloring here. Our northern snows rob our English women of that."

"And yet England is a good way from the pole. And *you* are not like a snowdrop, Mr. Langton, at all."

"I am scarcely English; my mother was an Italian."

"Was she? I did not know. And have you lived in Italy? Ah, Mr. Langton!" she cried suddenly, in a quick outburst of her southern enthusiasm. "Tell me about Italy. What part of it

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