

# THE WEDDING RING,

A TALE OF TO-DAY,

BY ROBERT BUCHANAN,

Author of "The Shadow of the Sword," "God and the Man," "Stormy Waters," &c.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

And what's to me a ring o' gold  
That proves the written law?  
A ring of air's around my heart  
That sadly breaks in twain!  
*Old Ballad.*

CHAPTER I AND II.—Mr and Mrs O'Mara, both of them artists, occupy rooms in Peter street, Westminster, with their infant child, Dora. The husband is somewhat of a spendthrift and idle to boot, but the wife manages to keep the wolf from the door as well as she can by miniature painting. Maddened by misfortune, O'Mara descends to cheating at cards, but is detected at his friends' chambers, and leaves in disgrace. As he arrives home he hears the voice of his wife and that of a strange man.

## CHAPTER III.—A THIEF IN THE NIGHT.

GILLIAN, meanwhile, had completed her work, and followed her husband's example of going out to find a patron for it, with less success than he had met.

None of the tradesmen to whom she offered the little packet of cards, painted with pretty, feeble designs, wanted them, or had need of any service she was fitted to perform. She was only one of many hundreds of women, gently born and nurtured, who were tramping the streets of London that day on similar errands, trying to turn to some profit the conventional accomplishment which is part of what is termed their education.

Of all the sad spectacles in the world, the penniless lady is the most hopeless. One meets her on every hand, bravely and silently fighting her hopeless battle, content if she can secure wages a bricklayer would scorn. And every day her numbers increase.

A neighbour as poor as herself, a little sempstress who worked sixteen hours a day for five farthings an hour in the garret overhead, had taken charge of Dora for her during her absence. She had nothing but thanks to give her for her services, nor would the brave little woman have accepted any recompense more solid.

Only those who have lived among the poor can know what they are to each other, how by continual little shiftings of their common burden they make it endurable to their bruised and heavy shoulders.

Gillian sat with her child in her lap beside the window in the fading light of the chill spring evening. There was a threat of rain in the low-lying clouds and in the moist, dark air. At no time of the year is Peter street a particularly pleasant neighbourhood, but it knows its dreariest period in the dreary evenings which precede the coming of summer, at least to the minds of such of its inhabitants as have any memory or imagination of the brooding peace of the lands beyond the city.

The cracked and dirty pavements, the roadway littered with vegetable offal, the sordid houses, from whose windows dangle wretched scraps of household linen the heavy air, gritty with dust or foul with the mists of the neighbouring river and the fumes of the forest of chimneys, all weigh upon the spirit with a leaden gloom. Swarms of children, ragged, dirty, and unkempt, fill the streets with tumult in a haggard semblance of play. Rusty carts and dilapidated poultry swear and spit and cluck and scratch about the kennels.

She fell into a dreamy reverie, from which she was awakened by the striking of a clock on the floor below. "Nine!" she counted. "It is time he was here. Surely, oh, surely, he will not disappoint me to-day, when he knows how much depends on it."

The child stirred in her lap with a feverish wail, and she raised it to her breast and rocked it there, trying to quiet it.

"If we could only get away from London," she thought, "away from the people who take Phillip from his work and his home! Oh, darling, hush! You must be patient, dear. Papa will come directly, and bring the medicine to make my darling well again, and perhaps the money to take us into the country, all among the grass and flowers and the fresh air."

She ran on, as mothers will, talking to the child as if her words were as comprehensible to its little intelligence as the happy tone in which she forced herself to speak them.

"That's all we want, isn't it, to make us well and strong again? Hush, what's that?"

She paused in her talk to the child with a sudden catch of the breath.

"Phillip? Yes, thank God!"

Her face flushed at the sound of a foot upon the stair. It mounted as she listened eagerly, but she fell back in her seat with a sigh of patient disappointment as a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in!" she answered, and the visitor obeyed.

"Mr Bream?" she asked, peering at him through the shadow.

"Yes," answered a cheery voice. "I was passing on my way home and thought I would run up and see how you were, and the little one."

Gillian rose and lit a candle.

Her visitor was a man of thirty-five or so, broad shouldered and strongly built, deep in the chest, long in the arms, with a clean-shaven face of healthy pallor and crisply curling hair. He was rather negligently dressed in the uniform of a Church of England curate, but his general style and manner were by no means of the conventional clerical kind, and but for his clothes he might have been anything in the world but a parson.

"Mr O'Mara's out, I see," he remarked, after shaking hands.

"Yes; he finished the picture this morning, and has gone to take it home. I am expecting him back every minute. Pray take a seat, Mr Bream."

Mr Bream's quick eyes, travelling round the room in a perfectly candid examination, rested on the brandy and the empty soda water bottle.

"Hum!" he said, in a tone too low to reach his companion's ear, and, obeying her invitation, drew the remaining chair to her side and sat down.

"And how is Dora?" he asked, bending above the child as she lay in her mother's lap. "Allow me."

He took the child delicately in his strong hands, and examined it by the light of the candle, with his finger on the little wrist.

"Hum!" he said again. "The medicine does not seem to have answered as well as I had expected. You are sure you obeyed the directions?"

Gillian's fluttering breath was the only answer to his query.

"The pulse is weaker," said Bream, as if to himself, but with his eyes fixed on the mother's averted face. "Dry skin, distinctly feverish—Mrs O'Mara, answer me. Has the child had the medicine?"

"No," she answered faintly.

"That," said the curate, "can mean only one thing—that you have not the money to buy it. Come, come, are we not old friends enough yet to speak to each other plainly? Did you put your pride in the balance with your child's life?"

"With her life?" she said. "Oh, Mr Bream!"

"The child is seriously ill," he answered. "She was ill yesterday, and is worse to-day."

Mrs O'Mara stared at him with a face as white as paper.

"I warn you that Dora's life is in danger. She must have proper treatment, proper food, change of air. Think! Is there no way of procuring these for her?"

Gillian shook her head, with her hands opening and shutting with a nervous, mechanical gesture. The blow had been so sudden she could not realise it yet.

"The medicine," said Mr Bream, "is easily arranged for."

He turned to the table, and wrote on a leaf torn from his note book.

"Excuse me," he said, "while I give this to the landlady."

Gillian, left alone with the child, strained it in her arms, but without looking at it, staring straight before her, with a wide-eyed look of terror.

"Listen to me, Mrs O'Mara," said Bream, re-entering the room. "I knew, when first you came to live in this place, that both you and your husband were different in birth and breeding from the people about you. It was impossible to see either of you and not to know it. It was not my business then—it would have been an impertinence—to ask questions, to pry into your past, to seek in any way to know more of your history than you chose to tell. It is different now, and I am resolved to allow no scruple of false delicacy to restrain me from prompting you to plain duty. Have you any relations, any friends, who could help you? I do not ask to know who they are, for the moment at least. But, are there any such?"

"No," she answered. "There are none. I wore out their patience months ago."

"If you have friends and relatives," said Bream,

"think if there is not one among them who would

help you once more. Your child's life depends upon it!"

"I have tried them," she answered. "They have not even answered my letters."

"Your parents?"

"They are dead!"

"Your husband's friends?"

"He has none. None at least who would help."

"Who are his friends? You knew his family when you married him?"

"No."

She tried to bind her answer to that one syllable, but her longing for sympathy, the need which lies in all of us to lighten the burden of our suffering by speech, impelled her on, though she kept watch over herself, and spoke only in guarded words.

"He was a stranger when he came to—to where I lived. I was an only child. He said he loved me. My father was dying, my mother was dead, I had neither brother nor sister, I saw the time coming when I should be alone in the world. He won my father's confidence, who was glad to leave me with a protector who could take care of me, and urged me to the marriage."

"And you know nothing of his people—of his family?"

"Nothing. I do not even know if he had any right to the name he gave me."

Mr Bream was silent for a moment before asking—

"Does he know the state of the child?"

"I told him what you said last night. When he went out this morning with the picture he promised, if he sold it, to return and give me some money for the child. Oh, my poor little innocent darling!"

The floodgates of her tears, clogged too long, opened, and she wept without restraint.

"I have some money," said Bream, "entrusted to me for charitable purposes by friends of mine. A mouth of country air and proper attention, and wholesome food, would save the child's life. You must let me be your banker, Mrs O'Mara. No, no! I won't hear a word. You must take it. When fortune is kinder to you, as must happen, for no man of Mr O'Mara's talents can remain poor for long, you may repay me, and if you like to add a little interest, I shall not refuse it. Now, my dear Mrs O'Mara, I won't hear another word on the subject. It's settled and done with. Here is the money—ten pounds. With economy that should be enough to give you and Dora a month in the country, or at the seaside. Mr O'Mara, I am sure, will not object to your receiving it as a loan."

"I can't refuse it," said Gillian. "I have not the right. And yet—Mr Bream, I shall never be able to repay you."

"You will repay me, and over pay me, by bringing back Dora strong and well. In the meantime, while you are away, I must try and see if I cannot find you some employment in the neighbourhood. Do you think you could teach in the school? One of the ladies there is about to leave us. The salary is not large, but every little helps, and we might be able to find something better later on. And now I must get away, for I have other visits to make. No, don't move, I beg. I can find my way out perfectly well. Good bye, little one; I hope you will come back with the roses in your cheeks which used to be there. Good night, Mrs O'Mara."

He gently extricated his hand from Gillian's gratefully clinging grasp, and bustled out to cut short the flood of incoherent thanks she poured out on him. The landing outside was too dark to permit him to see the figure of O'Mara, against whom he almost brushed as he descended the stairs.

Left alone with Dora, Gillian's joy overflowed in a thousand hysterical caresses, which so frightened the child that she began to cry. The mother quieted her by dancing before her eyes the glittering coins which Bream had left behind him; a thousand times the sum in minted gold had never sounded half so sweet in the miser's ears as did the clink of those few precious coins in Gillian's.

"Isn't he a good man, my darling? You shall learn to bless him, and thank him, and pray for him. He has saved your life, my sweet, and your poor mother's too, for how could I live if my precious one were taken away from me? I knew help would come. I knew it. God could not be so cruel as to rob me of you, my treasure."

She stopped suddenly at sight of O'Mara, who had entered the room unnoticed, and was standing almost beside her, his clothes glistening with rain.

"You seem excited," he said. "May I ask if anything in particular has occurred?"

His sudden appearance, his monotonous, mocking voice, froze her with terror and foreboding.

In that sudden bright dream of hope for her child she had forgotten her husband's mere existence. At the first sight of him she had instinctively closed her hand upon the money. She stood pausing and staring at him, as if he had surprised her in the commission of a theft. He looked back at her with a face like a mask, and his eyes glittering evilly in the candle light.

"What have you got in your hand?" he asked.

"Mr Bream has been here," she began, and paused.

"Mr Bream has been here," he repeated. "Well?"

"He has given me money to take Dora into the country."

"How much?" he asked.

"Ten pounds," she answered. He had expected her to say less, and had merely asked the question to help her in the lie, which showed how little real knowledge he had of her nature after their years of marriage.

"Mr Bream is generous," he said, with a hardly perceptible sneer.

His manner was unusual, and puzzled Gillian almost as much as it frightened her. There was something of a struggle going on in his mind, which he disguised by his expressionless face and voice. He meant to take the money Bream had left, but his sense of shame was not wholly dead, and he hesitated as to the means he should employ to wrest it from her.

Suddenly his brutality, always ill concealed beneath the varnish of his affections, triumphed.

"I want that money," he said. "Give it to me!"

For the first time for many a day, the courage which underlay Gillian's acquiescence flamed out into open revolt.

"Not one penny if you kill me!" she answered, with her teeth set, and outraged wife and mother written in her face, and the inspired poise of her figure as she faced him. "Stand off!" she cried as he advanced. "Don't dare to touch me. It is my child's life I hold in my hands, and I will die rather than yield it up."

He made a sudden clutch at the hand which held the money, and, missing it, seized her by the throat in a sudden access of rage. For his moment her passion lent her strength, and she struggled hard, but the cruel grip choked her breath. She tried to cry for help, but only a stifled moan escaped her, and she fell, striking her head heavily against the leg of the table, with a crash which seemed to shake the house, and lay still upon the floor.

With a noiseless step O'Mara ran to the door and listened.

The house was still; no one had heard Gillian's fall.

He crept back to her, and saw from among the tumbled tresses of her hair a dark red line, momentarily growing in width, staining the boards. Even in falling she had kept the hand which held the money close shut.

In a thievish tremor, with his heart beating like a muffled drum in his ears, he knelt beside her, and forced open the reluctant fingers. With pale face and shaking limbs he moved backwards to the door, clearing it to shut out the haunting vision of Gillian's white face—whiter in contrast with that widening stain.

A minute later he had reached the street.

## CHAPTER IV.—THE CLOUD BREAKS.

WHEN, slowly, like a swimmer rising through deep, dark waters to the growing light above, Gillian came back to consciousness, phantom memories of the troubled visions which had haunted her through her long sleep so mingled with realities that it took some time to settle her impressions of the things around her.

She was in bed, in a large and lofty room, which was certainly not the room in which the last few moments of her life had been passed, though whose it might be, or how she had come there, were mysteries at which she could make no guess.

There were hushed voices speaking at a little distance, but she was so weak that when she tried to turn her face in that direction she found the effort beyond her strength. She lay and wondered, with a languid curiosity, till a step approached her bed, and she saw, bending above her, the face of a young woman, with a cloud of fair hair arranged beneath a white cap.

A soft hand touched her forehead, and a voice asked:

"You are better, now?"

"Where am I?" Gillian would have asked in return, but her voice, like her strength, had gone, and the low and broken murmur which escaped her lips were scarcely audible to her own ears.

"You have been very ill," the girl said, in answer to the movement of her lips. "Do not try to talk, you are too weak. You are in St Thomas's Hospital. You have been here over a week."

Memory flowed back on Gillian like a flood.

"Dora!" she panted feebly.

No emotion less strong than that all conquering one of maternity could have given her the strength to shape an intelligible word.

"Your little girl? She is well. She is in the country. Mr Bream is taking care of her. You shall see her when you are well enough—to-morrow, perhaps, if the doctor will allow you. And now you must be very quiet, and not try to talk any more. You have been very ill indeed, and in great danger; but that is over now."

Gillian was so weak that before the happy tears the woman's reassuring words had called to her eyes were dry upon her lashes, she had fallen asleep. When next she woke the room was growing dark with shadows. The great bulk of the Palace of Parliament was dull purple against the rosy light of the western sky, and softened murmurs of voices and the clank of cars came up from the river below.

Presently a voice was heard praying, and muffled responses came from the rows of beds which lined the ward. Then a hymn was sung.

"Abide with me, fast falls the eventide!"

and the guests of the great hostelry of the good Saint Thomas addressed themselves peacefully to sleep.

She woke in the early morning to find the gilded vane of St. Stephen's burning like a beacon in the bright dawn, and lazily watched the last thin wreaths of vapour from the river melt in the warm air. Her mind seemed as feeble as her body; her one definite idea was that Dora was well, and that she should see her.

She thought of her husband, and though her memory of every detail of their life together was clear and perfect, she remembered him with neither hate nor horror, but with the same languid indifference, which nothing but the idea of her child could stir. She murmured the name to herself, finding that after her night's sleep she had strength enough to speak it.

"Dora, Dora, Dora."

And so she fell asleep, like a tired child.

There was the echo of a well known voice in her ears when she woke again, and it was with no shock of surprise that she recognised it as Mr Bream's.

It would not be advisable, you think," he was saying, "to give her any hint of that matter yet?"

"I think not," another voice replied. "She is very weak. There is no necessity for telling her yet. Good news can always wait; it loses nothing. Look! She is awake. Don't stay too long with her."

Bream came and sat beside her, with the grave and friendly smile his face constantly wore. He took her hand—the sight of it surprised him, it was so wan and thin—in his, and patted it gently.

"Hush!" he said. "You must let me do all the talking. You want to know first about Dora? Dora is doing grandly. She has been in the country exactly a week, and has put on exactly two pounds in weight. I made the people who have her weigh her every day and send me a bulletin. Tell me the age of a child, and how much the child weighs, and I'll tell you whether it's healthy or not. When will you see her, is the next question, isn't it? That, my dear Mrs O'Mara, depends entirely on yourself. It depends on how soon you get strong enough to bear the meeting. Let us make a bargain. If you are very good, and get better very fast—let me see, to-day is Friday—yes, you shall see Dora on Sunday. Is that understood?"

There was an almost magic influence in Bream's strength and tenderness, in his kindly face and helpful voice, which had often done a patient more good than all the drugs in the pharmacopoea could have worked. Gillian smiled at him through the moisture with which her weakness and his friendliness had filled her eyes, and he felt her feeble fingers press his ever so lightly.

"That's well," he said, as he rose. "I must go now. This is not the regular visiting hour at all, and I have been admitted only by special favour. I walked this hospital before I took my degree and was house surgeon in this very ward for two years. Good-bye, and remember your promise. No improvement means no Dora!"

With such a hope for her sick heart to feed on it was not wonderful that Gillian should make rapid progress. The doctor who saw her morning and evening marvelled at the speed of her return to convalescence.

"I am to see Dora on Sunday, if I am better," she told him, and the explanation sufficed, as she had thought it would.

"Dora deserves to be patented and registered as a new healing agent," said the surgeon.

Sunday afternoon came, and with it came Dora, carried in the arms of a strapping, ruddy cheeked peasant woman, who, dropping a curtsy, introduced herself as the little lady's nurse, and hadn't she come along beautiful? So pale and wizened as she had been, and now just look at her.

From the moment the child was laid upon her breast Gillian's recovery went on at an even quicker rate. With reviving strength came now interest in the things of life. She asked Bream when next he came where her husband was.

"He has vanished," was the answer. "We have no news of him."

"Was any effort made to find him?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Bream. "Every effort, but without result."

"Dora and I must face the world alone," said Gillian, after a pause.

"I hope—I think," said Bream, "that the struggle will not be so severe as you anticipate. You are strong enough to bear good news now. I have some brave news. Your trials are over, Mrs O'Mara."

She looked at him with questioning eyes and heightened colour.

"I have spoken perhaps before I ought," said Mr Bream; "indeed there is an accredited messenger of the good news, a lawyer with whom I have been in communication for the past week, who can tell you all the details. I can tell you nothing more than that you are, by the death of your uncle, Robert Scott, of Sydney, put beyond the need of want."

"I am very glad," she said, "for Dora's sake."

It was a relief to Bream to find her take the news so quietly.

"I have seen you bear so much trouble bravely," he said, "that I could not help telling you so much. May I bring the lawyer here to-morrow afternoon?"

"I am glad I heard it first from you," she answered. "Dear friend, you are my good angel."

Bream came again the following day, accompanied by a gray-haired, fatherly old gentleman, of precise and methodical manner, whom he introduced as Mr Probyn.

"Of the firm of Grice, Probyn, and Davies, Old Jewry," added the solicitor. "I have the honour of addressing Mrs Philip O'Mara."

"That is my name," said Gillian.

"Otherwise Gillian Scott, only child of the late John Scott, doctor of medicine, of Merton Barnett, Shropshire."

"Yes."

"Do you remember your father having referred, in your presence, to a brother, Robert Scott?"

"Yes, he was my father's younger brother. He went out to Australia before I was born."

"Quite so," said Mr Probyn, referring to some memoranda. "In the year 1849. There were money transactions between them after Robert Scott left England."

"I believe so. My uncle was not successful in his business, and on more than one occasion he applied to my father for assistance."

"Quite so," said Mr Probyn again. "I am happy to state, however, that his bad luck did not last. He died on the 3rd of February of the present year, a widower and childless. I have here an attested copy of his will."

He unfolded the document, and, perching a pair of gold-rimmed glasses on the extreme tip of his nose, scanned it at arm's length.

"I, Robert Scott—(him, need scarcely trouble you with mere formalities)—do hereby give, bequeath, and devise all property whatsoever of which I die possessed, after the payment of my just debts, to Gillian, only daughter of my late beloved brother, John Scott, of Merton Barnett, in the county of Shropshire, England. The personalty has been sworn under £20,000, and will be transferred to your account in London on the completion of the legal forms necessary in such cases. There is also some land in the neighbourhood of Sydney, of which you would have no difficulty of disposing, if so minded, though we are advised by our correspondents, the solicitors of the late Mr Scott, that it is steadily rising in value, and is, therefore, probably worth retaining. Those and other details can be arranged at your convenience. Meanwhile, madam," the old gentleman rose and made a cordially stately bow, "I have the pleasure to wish you joy of your good fortune."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

The death is announced at the age of 63 of Mr George Williams, of Scorcher, Cornwall. Deceased was a director of Bolitho's Bank, and was largely interested in tin smelting and as an adventurer in Cornish mines.

WHAT OUR ARTIST HAS TO PUT UP WITH.—Our Artist—"Well, how do you like the portraits, Miss Bunny? The sitters are all old friends of yours, I believe?" Miss Bunny (triumphantly)—"Yes; and, only think, I've actually managed to guess them all!"

—Punch.