

## *The Kiss*

CHARLES W. CHESNUTT

MRS. CARTWRIGHT left the streetcar at the nearest corner, and walked the half of a city block that led to her own gateway, and up the flower-bordered flagged walk across the green lawn to the verandah where her two children, Talbot and Cecile, were playing, under the supervision of a white-capped nurse. They were beautiful children, fashionably dressed. It was a beautiful home, upon a beautiful street, and Mrs. Cartwright was a beautiful woman.

Beautiful, and young. She had been less than twenty when Eustace Cartwright had first met her. Her family had been poor, and in financial difficulties. Cartwright had rescued them from ruin, and, fascinated by Hilda's beauty and her wit, had taken her from an eight-room house in a shabby suburb, had bestowed his old and honored name upon her, and, after a summer in Switzerland, had brought her home to the handsome residence on Euclid Avenue which his grandfather had built forty years before. It was not in the latest style, but was possessed of a spaciousness, a dignity and a comfort which suited Cartwright's quiet, scholarly tastes.

They had been very happy for several years. Hilda's two children had occupied her mind and her time. She appreciated to the full her good fortune; never more than when, while driving in her carriage or her automobile, she passed her former friends on foot, or, when, while shopping, she saw them standing behind the counter. She wore the airs and graces of a fine lady in a manner to satisfy even her husband's friends, who had been not entirely certain that Cartwright had not stooped to marry her.

The serpent had entered Eden when Cartwright's nephew, Carroll Deane, the son of his only sister, became a member of the household, after the death of his mother, already a widow. Cartwright was fond of the handsome, blue-eyed youth, whose liveliness was in marked contrast to his own taciturn sedateness. He showered the boy with benefits, and found a keen pleasure in seeing him enjoy the things for which the elder man had never greatly cared. Carroll was a convenient

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escort for Hilda when Cartwright did not care to go to a ball or party, a function which Carroll seemed more willing to perform than most young men to wait upon their female relatives. The beauty of the two young people—their vivacity, their youthful zest for pleasure, their freedom of intercourse, brought about the old result. There was a fierce insurrection of primal passions, a few months of guilty pleasure, and then Carroll had gone away to college.

Carroll and Hilda corresponded during his absence. He came home for the Christmas holidays. He went away again, and the correspondence continued. He returned for the Easter vacation, and had left that morning, a day late, for the East. She had accompanied him to the station, on a streetcar, and they had parted with a handclasp and a few whispered words—their real parting had taken place, an hour before, at the house. She was conscious, when the train pulled out, of a loss, and yet of a relief. The mantle of deceit did not rest lightly upon her shoulders—she had not sinned without suffering.

She was glad, as she went up the walk that day, that Carroll was gone. She had quite decided to break off their affair. It was too wicked, too treacherous, too dangerous. Eustace had been easy to deceive, but once enlightened, was not the man to endure lightly such an offense at the hands of the objects of his own bounty. Carroll had agreed with her. He was going to Europe in June, to be gone all summer. They would write, now and then, friendly letters—that was all.

As an earnest of her reformation, which was to begin as soon as he had gone, she had given him his letters and demanded hers.

“I destroyed them,” he said, “last night.”

She was obliged to take his word, though she had not always found him truthful—light love is apt to take liberties with truth. A lingering doubt had assailed her at the railroad station.

“You are sure, dear,” she said, “that you burnt my letters?”

“Quite sure,” he returned. “I hated to, but we had agreed that it was best.”

It was sweet to have him hate to; but it was best, and she felt relieved, and tried to be glad—that he had burnt her letters, and that he was gone, and that she would not see him again

for many months, by which time it would be easy for them to meet as friends and relatives, and with no other thought.

This feeling had grown in strength during her return homeward on the streetcar. The sight of her beautiful home, the outward and visible sign of physical comfort and assured position; the merry greeting of her rosy-cheeked children—the pledges of her wifehood—strengthened her renewed sense of virtue and conjugal fidelity.

She had laid off the last of her wraps, together with the last lingering consciousness of her sins, and had entered upon her role of ideal wife, when the telephone bell rang. She was near the instrument and took down the receiver.

“Hello, is this East 897-B?”

“Yes, is that you, Eustace?”

“Yes, Hilda. I have bad news, Carroll’s train met with an accident, about twenty miles out. Many were killed or injured.”

Her heart stopped beating.

“And Carroll?” she breathed.

“Is among the killed.”

She dropped the receiver and sat for a moment like one dazed. Then the instinct of self-preservation returned, and she picked up the receiver and placed it to her ear.

“Hello, hello, hello!” came her husband’s voice. “Are you there, Hilda?”

“Yes—yes!”

“I thought they’d cut us off. I wanted to say that a relief train is leaving the Union Station in ten minutes, and I am going out on it. If he is dead, I will bring his body home. It is terrible—poor boy, just on the threshold of life—facing its struggles and its joys—my sister’s only child, whom I loved as my own son.”

Hilda had been thinking with lightning-like rapidity (an electric wave, it is said, would flash around the earth an incredible number of times a second, could it last so long). Carroll was dead, and he had not destroyed her letters—she knew instinctively that he had not destroyed them—and they were either on his person or in his luggage. Eustace would go to the scene of the wreck, and he would find them, and she would be disgraced and ruined. A wild thought seized her.

“Can I go with you?” she demanded anxiously.

She would go with him, and perhaps she could get the letters, so that Eustace would never see them.

“I don’t think it necessary, dear. The scene would only harrow your feelings.”

“I might be of some use,” she insisted.

“You can be of more use in preparing for our reception. And you haven’t time. I’ve barely five minutes to make the station, and it would take you twenty, if you had an automobile at the door.”

She hung up the receiver, despair in her heart. Never before had her sin appeared so hideous. She felt a foreboding, not dim and distant, but vivid and imminent, that her punishment was at hand—that she would lose everything that made her life worth living. She would lose husband, children, home—her position, her good name—all the things for which women strive, and which few of whom attain in such full measure as they had come to her. She could not even retain the solace of guilty love—for her lover was dead—dead in his youth and his beauty and his sins, with the proofs of his treachery upon his person. She would have nothing left, except her beauty, and the flower of that was gone; nor was it a commodity that could go twice to such a market. She wished that she were dead.

But she took no steps to carry out the wish. Perhaps, after all, Carroll had destroyed the letters. They might have been lost in the wreck. Perhaps Eustace would not search Carroll’s luggage. She would hope against hope—even against the cold fear which clutched her heart and told her there was no escape.

Cartwright returned home in the afternoon, bringing the body of his nephew. Hilda awaited her fate in agonized suspense. But there was nothing unusual in Cartwright’s manner, unless it were an added gravity, for which the occasion was sufficient to account. Hilda had very little opportunity for conversation with him during the day—he was fully occupied with preparations for the funeral and with communications from and to friends of Carroll.

Carroll’s trunk and valise had been brought to the house, and Hilda, during her husband’s absence, examined their

contents thoroughly. She found many souvenirs of their love—a lock of hair, a ring, half a dozen photographs, a ribbon, a glove, a stolen slipper—each with its tender associations. Had she been less anxious, she would have wept her eyes out, but even the tragedy of death faded in importance beside the tragedy of the life which would face her should Eustace find her letters.

She felt a measure of relief when she did not find them. Would she have felt more relieved at finding them? She did not know—there was always the possibility that Eustace might have found them first and read them. On the whole, she thought she would rather have found them; she would have destroyed them, and the chances were that her husband had not examined Carroll's luggage.

She even overcame her emotions enough to make sure that the letters were not upon Carroll's body. He must have destroyed them, as he had said. She had misjudged the poor boy. He had told the truth, and had made a sacrifice, for her sake. She would cherish a tender memory of him, for their love's sake.

The funeral took place next day. Eustace's manner reassured Hilda. Nothing was omitted which the dignity and position of the family required. Eustace wore a band of crepe upon his hat, and, with Hilda and the children in deep mourning, followed the body to the family vault in Lake View Cemetery.

Hilda felt greatly relieved when all was over. Her husband had shown no sign of suspicion. It was inconceivable that he could have done what he had that day, with knowledge of the dead youth's treachery. Hilda swore a silent and solemn oath that never again would she run such a risk—never again would she be tempted to deceive this loyal and courteous gentleman who had done so much for her. She would prove, by her devotion, how much she loved and respected him, and she would atone, so far as in her lay, for the wrong she had already done him. The atonement, of course, must be secret, as the sin had been. Confession would be worse than useless; it could do no one any good—it would not only destroy her husband's happiness but deprive her of opportunity for reparation.

She felt, as she sat opposite Eustace at dinner that night, a chastened gladness that Carroll was gone. He had, in a sense, deserved his fate, and she was free, from her sin and from its consequences—free to tread the straight and pleasant path of honest happiness by the side of a gentleman who loved her—free through no merit of her own, it was true, but by the decree of a kind fate which had spared her while taking her fellow sinner.

When the dessert was served, she rang for the nurse, who took the children away.

“Will you come into my study?” said Eustace, quietly, when they were gone. “I have something to say to you.”

The color left her face, the light forsook her eyes. Her panoply of self-absolution and future immaculateness slipped, like a dropped garment, from her sinful soul and left it bare, as she rose mechanically and followed the accusing figure of her husband from the room.

His study lay across the hall. As she entered, he placed a chair for her, with formal courtesy. He then unlocked a drawer of his desk and took from it a bundle of letters, tied with narrow blue ribbon. She recognized the ribbon and remembered vividly when and from where it had been taken.

“These, I think” said Cartwright, in calm and even tones, “are yours—it is the law, I believe, that letters belong, first to the recipient, then to the writer. My interest, I think, was sufficient to justify my having read them—or some of them—enough of them. I now return them—to their lawful owner.”

He put out his hand. She took the letters mechanically and laid them on her lap. An hour earlier, had she laid hands on them, she would have concealed them in her bosom. Now they had been read. Then they had been pregnant with immense possibilities—now they were dead—a spent rocket—dead as the body of her lover in the vault—dead as her hope for future happiness. They might lie on her lap, or on the floor, or in Eustace’s desk, so far as he and she were concerned.

She heard him speaking, as though from a distance, and it was with an effort, at first, that she grasped the purport of his speech.

“Of course you realize, Hilda, what the result of this discovery must be. You can no longer be wife of mine, or I husband of yours. I have lost, at one blow, wife and nephew—both of whom I loved—what more I have lost I leave for you to imagine; you have a keen mind and a judgment riper than your years.

“I shall not attempt to fix or to distribute the blame for this deplorable affair which has worked my misfortune. Carroll is dead—as the result of his own folly, in all likelihood, for had he left yesterday, as he ought to have done, he would not have been a passenger upon the wrecked train. But you were the older of the two. You were a mother—you had your children to consider. And you were a wife, and held my honor in your hands.”

He had not lifted his voice in the least, but upon her quivering conscience every word fell like the lash of a whip. She shrank together, and almost cowered before him, while her eyes sought the floor, but could get no further than the damning bundle of letters upon her lap.

“I shall not reproach you,” he went on, “now or ever. When this interview is ended, I shall never mention the matter again—it will not be a pleasant subject. As I have said, you can no longer be my wife. But neither would I have you leave me. There are the children—I must consider them, if you did not; they must never, by any act of mine, have occasion to hold their mother in disrespect. Carroll was my sister’s child; to blacken his memory would be to reflect upon her and upon all of us; nor do I care to become a subject of pity or ridicule.”

She wondered vaguely, and dully, what he was going to—what he *could* do that would carry out his purpose and yet leave undone the things he did not wish to do.

“You will continue,” he said, “that is, if my wishes prevail—to occupy your place in the household. To the world—to the servants even, there will be no change. If there should be at first some slight and inevitable constraint, and you think the servants might take notice, you can discharge them all and take on new ones who will know no past with which to compare our future. You will doubtless be glad to share with me the effort to keep the children in the dark—for their sakes?”

He seemed to wait for an answer, and she murmured something inarticulate which he apparently took for acquiescence.

"This, of course, will limit our intercourse. The house is large, and we need not interfere at all with one another. A very slight difference of arrangement will effect all the change that is necessary."

Her fingers were mechanically picking at the folds of her gown. The bundle of letters had slipped to the floor. Something within her shrank from what the life to which he condemned her might become. Nor had her husband ever seemed so noble, so worthy of love and respect as now when he sat in judgment upon her, and she had lost him.

Perhaps he noticed her change of expression.

"You shall be free," he said, "to come and go. I shall not interfere with your movements—except that I shall exercise a certain supervision over your company, for both our sakes. Upon formal occasions, when it is conventionally required, I will attend you—perhaps I have neglected my duty in that regard, and am myself to blame, in part, for what has happened.

"If you find life unendurable under these terms," he added, rising as though to dismiss her, "doubtless we can find a remedy. You could travel, or reside abroad, for your health. Or if you should wish, sometime, to seek a divorce—such things can be quietly arranged, with no scandal.

"And now, if there is nothing you wish to say, or ask, shall we terminate this painful interview?"

She rose, and with desperate effort, stepped firmly forward—had she faltered, he would, she knew, have offered her his arm—and she was unworthy to take it. He stooped, however, picked up the packet of letters, and, as he opened the door of the library with one hand, extended the bundle with the other.

"Permit me," he said, "you were leaving your letters."

How many lifetimes Hilda Cartwright lived in the next five years, she never stopped to figure out, but the time was long. From the very beginning she accepted, as a finality, the situation and her husband's terms. To the outside world, they were husband and wife, living in conventional harmony—if conjugal harmony be any longer conventional. If friends of their own social circle suspected anything between them, they

were courteous enough not to mention it—to their faces; and when curiosity had nothing new to feed upon, it soon died away.

Their divided life was rendered easier by a gradual change in their habits. Cartwright had never cared a great deal for society, and Hilda began to go out less and less, until she became, in time, almost as much a recluse as her husband.

As the best atonement she could make for her offense, she sought to become what she imagined Eustace would have liked her to be, had she never disappointed him. She was a perfect housekeeper, an ideal mother. Such social duties as she still undertook were performed with effectiveness, grace and dignity, and Mrs. Cartwright became known as one of the most respected and admired of the younger matrons of her set. She was active in the work of her church, and a liberal contributor, both of time and money, to a number of good charities. Her benefactions fell like dew upon many a thirsty soul, because they felt in what she did the subtle sympathy with weakness or misfortune which comes only from those who have trod the same path.

Time dealt gently with her. She grew in the noble virtues which take their root in self-sacrifice. They left their impress upon her face, which became more beautiful with the passing years. At thirty she was in a young matronly prime which put her youthful and more immature beauty to the blush.

During all the years of her atonement, Cartwright had never, by a single word, recalled the subject of their estrangement. Nor were they much together, except in the presence of others. He was always courteous—too courteous, one shrewd lady said, for a man who loved his wife—and sometimes almost kind. But while Hilda loved him well enough to have thrown herself at his feet and placed his heel upon her neck, she was ever conscious of the impalpable barrier which separated them—a barrier as impenetrable as the shirt of chain mail which gentlemen of the romantic past wore under their silken doublets when dining with their friends. She did not attempt to pass this barrier—it would turn a smile, or a fond word, she felt instinctively, as surely as the steel jacket would stop a dagger-thrust. If he would ever change she did

not know. If so, she would be there, beside him; if not, she must bear her punishment as best she could.

She knew he was not happy—and the knowledge was part, the greater part—of her punishment. Nor had he quite her resources to ward off unhappiness. Companionship was in large measure denied him. She had her children, nor did she realize, in her absorption, the extent to which she monopolized their society. He threw himself eagerly into affairs, and devoted himself, in his hours of relaxation, to the studies of which he was so fond.

But Hilda saw he was not happy, and, at last, that he was not well. His cheeks grew thinner, his hair was more than touched with gray, he lost some of the spring of life. Hilda watched him silently, with a yearning love, and with a growing fear. If he should die, it would be of unhappiness, and she would have murdered him as surely as though she had dropped poison in his cup.

In the spring of the fifth year of their estrangement, Cartwright fell ill. The doctor diagnosed the case as one of fever, possibly malignant, and ordered isolation and a trained nurse.

“I shall nurse him myself,” said Hilda firmly.

“Impossible, madam. You will be liable to infection. And there are the children to consider.”

“They can be sent away, if necessary,” she declared. “For myself I do not care—and I am strong. I shall nurse him.”

She could not be dissuaded, but took her place by Cartwright’s bedside. At the height of the fever he became delirious, and said some things which tore her heart—not altogether with pain. She had a trained nurse to assist her, but at these times she sent the nurse out of the room.

He seemed to be mending, when, one morning, he took a turn for the worse. The doctor made a careful examination.

“Astonishing,” he said, as he finished. “I never knew of such a combination. He has developed diphtheria, of a malignant type.”

She knew what this implied. “Is there no hope?” she whispered hoarsely.

“None,” he replied, “without a miracle—and the age of miracles is past. At his age, he could scarcely hope to recover

even in good health; in his present weakened condition there is no power of resistance whatever—it is only a matter of a day or two. Meanwhile it is dangerous for you to be near him—you have denied yourself sleep and rest—you are in none too good condition yourself to resist disease.”

“I shall stay beside him,” she declared, “to the last moment. I wish to be near him when he—if he—recovers consciousness. If it were only for a moment, and I were away, I should never forgive myself.”

He protested, but in vain. Finding she would stay, he gave her minute directions how to avoid infection.

“Above all things, guard your mouth. Don’t let your lips touch anything—not even your hands—that could possibly convey the contagion. I think you are running an unnecessary risk, but willful woman—”

“Must have her way,” said Hilda, closing the conversation.

The doctor went away, but returned in an hour, remained two, and went away again.

“I’ll be back in another hour. He’ll last till morning, perhaps.”

While the doctor was gone, Cartwright opened his eyes and looked up at his wife. The nurse was asleep in the next room.

“Hilda,” he said, “is it you, dear?”

“Yes, Eustace,” she returned, dropping on her knees beside the bed and taking his thin hand in hers.

“I am ill, am I not, Hilda?”

“Yes, dear, you are very ill.”

“I am going to die, Hilda. I haven’t cared a great deal about living, for several years.”

“Spare me, Eustace, and spare yourself. If you die, I shall not care to live.”

His face lit up with a rare smile.

“Do you love me?” he whispered, with his failing breath.

“I would give my life for you—and give it twice for one word of love.”

“One word, my darling—one word? I have loved you always—I have never ceased to love you, and I am dying of my love. I wish now that I could live, but I suppose it is too late. But kiss me, Hilda, before I die!”

Then bravely, and without a moment’s hesitation, she took

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her life into her hands and bent her face to his. He threw his arms, hot with fever, about her neck, and their lips met in a long, lingering caress.

They ought to have died, of course, and given their story a dramatic ending. But the doctor came back, an hour later, with a new culture which dissipated the gathering membrane.

They spent their new honeymoon in the Engadine—it was long before the war—and were as happy as chastened remorse, upon one side, and complete forgiveness, upon the other, and fervent love, upon both, would permit.