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Author: L. T. Meade

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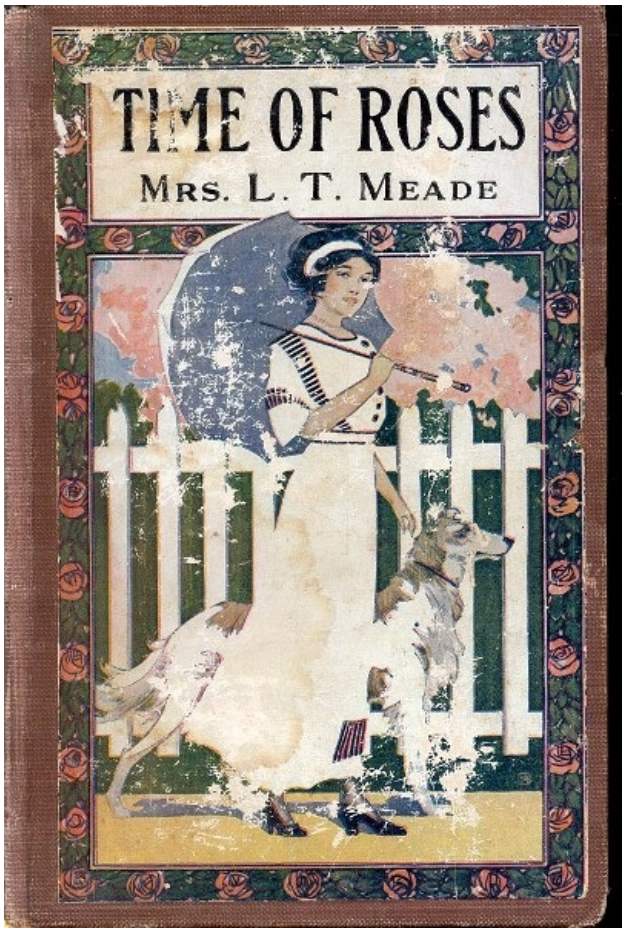

THE TIME OF ROSES

BY

MRS. L. T. MEADE

AUTHOR OF

"A Bunch of Cherries," "Daddy's Girl," "Bad Little Hannah," "A World of Girls," "A School Favorite," Etc.

"It was the Time of Roses;
We plucked them as we passed."

CHICAGO
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THE TIME OF ROSES.

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CHAPTER I.

HOME AT LAST.

It was on a summer's evening early in the month of August that the little Mummy was once again seen on the platform at Dawlish.

She looked now very much like she did when we saw her of yore—slightly broadened, it is true, by the added years, but she still wore somewhat rusty widow's black, and her face still had that half-anxious, half-comical expression, which made people turn to look at her with something between a smile and a sigh. She was commonplace and plain, and yet in one sense she was neither commonplace nor plain. She had a character, and that character had developed during the last few years, and rather for the better.

There were very few passengers on the platform, and the little woman paced up and down, thinking to herself.

"She is coming home at last. I don't know whether I am glad or sorry. I wonder what sort of girl Miss Sharston is. She has been very kind to Florence; but it was rash of Florence to invite her. Still, I suppose we shall be able to manage all right." [Pg 6]

Just then the signal announcing the approaching train was lowered, and a moment or two later the said train drew up at the platform and one or two passengers alighted. Amongst these was a tall, well-set-up, dark-eyed girl, and accompanying her was another girl, who was not so tall and was very slender, with an ethereal sort of face, and large, speaking grey eyes.

The tall girl rushed up to where the little Mummy was standing.

"Here I am, Mummy," she said, "and this is Kitty, and we are both tired and hungry, and glad to see you again. Is there any sort of trap for our luggage, or can the porter take it and shall we walk to the cottage?"

"The cottage is just as small as ever it was, Florence," replied the little Mummy. "Oh, I am so glad to see you, Miss Sharston." Here she shook hands with Kitty Sharston.

"We like things small," said Kitty; "we want to have a real charming time in the country. It is very good of you to consent to take me in, Mrs. Aylmer."

A porter now appeared. Florence bustled off to see to the luggage, and Mrs. Aylmer and Kitty slowly left the station. Florence ran after them in a moment or two.

"Well," she said, "here we are! Both of us have done with school for ever and a day. We are grown-up girls ready to take our place in the world, and to give you a right good time, Mummy; isn't that so, Kitty?"

"Yes," said Kitty, in that gentle voice which always had a pathetic ring in it. Then she added after a moment's pause: "But I don't know that I am glad to have left school; I must confess that I enjoyed the last few years at Cherry Court School immensely." [Pg 7]

"Don't talk to me of Cherry Court School," said the widow, with a little shudder.

She glanced round in an inquiring way at Florence, who coloured faintly and then said, in a stout voice: "I have repented of that old sin long ago, and I do not in the least mind having Cherry Court School alluded to. I have had a right good time, and it was a very lucky thing for me I did not win that Scholarship, for if I had I should have been eating the bread of dependence now, whereas—" Here she drew herself up, uttered a quick sigh, and looked ahead of her.

Her face was not handsome, but it was bright and taking. She was a head and shoulders taller than the little Mummy, who gazed at her with something of her old expression of mingled affection and fear. Florence had quite double the strength of the little Mummy, and this astute personage was aware of the fact.

They reached the tiny house, where Sukey was standing on the steps, looking not a day older than she had done six years ago. She dropped a curtsey when she saw Florence, but Florence ran up and wrung her hand.

"How do you do, Sukey?" she said. "I am very glad to come home, and this is my great friend Miss Sharston."

Sukey stared up at Kitty; then she glanced at Mrs. Aylmer and slowly shook her head.

"It's a very, *very* small house," she said, "and how we are to fit you two young ladies in is more than I can tell." [Pg 8]

"Never mind, Sukey," said Mrs. Aylmer; "I have it all arranged; don't you go and put your finger into the pie and spoil things, you silly, stupid old thing."

Here Mrs. Aylmer shook her hand with a playful gesture at Sukey, and then the entire party found themselves in the house. Florence had not been home for two or three years. Kitty had never seen the cottage at Dawlish before. Certainly the one sitting-room was very tiny.

"How it has dwindled!" said Florence, looking round her. "Good gracious! Why, the ceiling nearly reaches my head, and as for the walls"—she stretched out her long arms playfully—"I can almost touch from wall to wall; but never mind, it's home; it's your house, Mummy, and you are good to take us girls in and look after us for a whole delightful fortnight."

"There is a very nice supper waiting for you," said Mrs. Aylmer, "and quite in the old style—crabs and a water-cress salad. I thought you would appreciate that; we so often had crabs for supper when—when you were here last, Flo. You remember them, don't you?"

"Nothing could be more appetising," replied Florence. "Would you like to come upstairs now, Kitty?"

Mrs. Aylmer had given up her wee bed-room to the two girls. Where she was to sleep was a mystery known only to herself; but, as she seemed quite cheerful and happy over it, Florence advised Kitty not to investigate matters too closely.

"It's the Mummy's way," she said; "she likes managing; she quite adores the thought of having us both with her in this little dull house. Can you put up with it, Kitty?" [Pg 9]

"The place is quite lovely," replied Kitty, "and I would put up with anything after the news I told you this morning."

"Oh, that your father is really coming back: that you have not to go to India after all: that you are going to live here and take a beautiful house and be real mistress of a home," said Florence.

"I don't know anything about the beautiful house, nor being mistress of a home," replied Kitty; "but I am going to be with father wherever he is, and that," she added, "will be home to me."

"Of course," answered Florence, in a somewhat wistful tone.

"But what are you going to do, Flo?"

"I am going to earn my living," replied Florence stoutly.

"Of course; but how?"

"I shall talk things over with you and the Mummy. I have left school at last for good. What a blessing it is that I shall not have anything to do with Aunt Susan! I feel so jolly independent; but I should like to meet her and—"

"Girls, supper is ready," called out Mrs. Aylmer's voice from below, and the two ran downstairs.

The meal was very merry; the old schoolfellows were glad to be together. Mrs. Aylmer chatted in very much the way she had chatted six years ago. She could not help constantly alluding to Mrs. Aylmer the great.

"I have not seen her," she said; "but she sends me my money regularly once a quarter—twelve pounds ten shillings. She never misses a day, I will say that for her, and I think I am a very good manager not to be one farthing in debt." [Pg 10]

"You are perfectly splendid, mother," replied Florence.

"She has never once asked for you; she said she would not, and she has kept her word," continued Mrs. Aylmer.

"Well, mother, does it matter?" replied the daughter.

"They say, too," continued the little Mummy—and here she heaved a heavy sigh—"that she has adopted a young man as her heir. I have never seen him, but his name is Maurice Trevor. He is no relation of any sort, and goodness knows why she has adopted him. They say he is a very pushing and a very designing young man, and that he twists poor Susan round his little finger. I know she sent him to Cambridge and spent an enormous sum on him there—two or three hundred a year at the very least—and now he has returned and lives with her, and is to take the management of her estates. She has been buying a lot of fresh property; but there—I am sick of the subject. You didn't play your cards well, Florence; you ought to have been in the position which young Mr. Trevor occupies."

"I am glad I am not," replied Florence; "I'm twice the girl for being independent. Mother, Kitty and I want to go out and have a walk by the seashore."

"Do, my dear, do; I have a great deal to contrive and manage, and Susan's temper is not what it was. Oh, don't breathe it too loud. I wouldn't part with her for the world; but really she does rule me. She'll be as cross as two sticks because we sat so long over supper. Do go; it is a lovely evening." [Pg 11]

So the two girls put on their hats and went out. There was a silver moon shining to-night on a silver sea, and the place looked calm and peaceful, as if no storms had ever ruffled those waters: as if no trouble had ever visited those shores.

Kitty, whose heart was full of song and her face of delight, almost danced as she walked. Florence's steps were also full of spring, but they were a little slower than her companion's.

"What are you thinking of, Flo?" said the younger girl.

"All sorts of things," replied Florence; "about that man, Maurice Trevor, for instance. I don't envy him."

"Nor do I. I wonder he submits to it," said Kitty. "But don't let us think of him. He has nothing whatever to do with us."

"No more he has," answered Florence; "but to eat the bread of dependence: to eat *her* bread! Oh, he must be a horror! I only trust I shall never meet him."

Kitty now linked her arm inside her companion's.

"You must often come and stay with me," she said: "it would be delightful. I will coax and beg of father to have a house where you can come; then you will have two homes, you know, Florry: the little Mummy's home, as you always call your mother, and my home. You will be equally welcome at both. Oh, dear, you are quite my very greatest friend—the greatest friend I have in all the world."

"You are wonderfully good to put up with me," said Florence; "but there, I have repented of that old sin, and it is not going to darken my life." [Pg 12]

"There is only one thing I dislike about you, Florence," said Kitty. She frowned slightly as she spoke.

"What is that?"

"You always will revert to the old times. Just do promise me that you won't speak of them again, at least to me."

"I will try not, darling; but you are good to forget."

CHAPTER II. [Pg 13]

THE LITTLE MUMMY'S ARRANGEMENTS.

Those who remember "A Bunch of Cherries" will recall the fact that Florence Aylmer left Cherry Court School under a cloud: that Kitty Sharston won the prize offered by Sir John Wallis, and of course stayed on at the school; and that Bertha Keys, finding her game was up and her wickedness discovered, disappeared—it was hoped by the unhappy girl whom she had injured never to show her face again.

In this old world of ours, however, bad people do not always receive their punishment, and it came to pass that Bertha Keys, although she had failed in the case of Cherry Court School, did manage to feather her nest and to secure a very comfortable post for herself.

So daring an adventuress was this young woman that she absolutely made up her mind to lay siege to no less a person than Mrs. Aylmer the great.

It was easy for her to do this. Mrs. Aylmer had not noticed her on that auspicious occasion when all the girls of the school were collected in Sir John Wallis's fine old house. The part that Bertha had played in the affair, which had lowered her niece in her eyes for ever, was very slightly impressed on her memory. There was a pupil teacher who had not behaved right, but what the [Pg 14] name of that pupil teacher was had never sunk into the good lady's memory.

She was terribly disappointed about her niece Florence, although she pretended not to care, and a month or two afterwards she advertised in a local paper for a companion.

The person who answered this advertisement was Bertha Keys. She managed to satisfy the good lady with regard to testimonials, taking care never to breathe the name of Cherry Court School. She secured the post, and from that moment ruled Mrs. Aylmer, although Mrs. Aylmer supposed that she ruled her.

Florence found a friend in Sir John Wallis, who put her on the foundation of an excellent school which he knew of. She was well educated, and now at the age of twenty was prepared to fight the battle of life.

Florence had received a present of twenty pounds from Sir John Wallis on leaving school, and with this slender provision she meant to fight the world and find her own niche.

Kitty Sharston had fulfilled all her early promise of beauty and grace. Her father was now returning to England, and she was to go and live with him.

Mrs. Aylmer the less was just as determined and just as peculiar as in the days of old. She always spoke out what she thought, and the next morning at breakfast, as the two girls with rosy faces and bright eyes sat round the very tiny board, she expounded her views.

"Florence," she said, "I am nothing if I am not frank." [Pg 15]

"We know that, Mummy," replied her daughter, with a twinkle in her bright dark eyes; "what is up now?"

"Only this: I have been thinking things in the night."

"Oh, do satisfy my curiosity, Mrs. Aylmer," exclaimed Kitty; "where did you sleep last night? You don't know how uncomfortable Florry and I were, fearing we had taken your bed."

"Which you did, my dear. If it was a subject of fear, your fears were realised," responded the little widow.

"Oh, but this is quite dreadful: ought we to stay on here, Florry, or, at least, ought I to stay on?"

"How much, Florry, are you going to pay me per week?" now exclaimed Mrs. Aylmer. "I wish I could take you, my dear, darling child, for nothing; but the fact is, I cannot, and if I could Sukey would not allow it. Sukey says that a greater stint she will not bear, and twelve pounds ten a quarter cannot be made to go farther than we two poor women make it go, Florence. Do you think you could rise to the sum of fifteen shillings a week if I give you meat every day?"

"Of course, Mummy, of course."

"And I must and will pay a pound a week," said Kitty; "why, it is cheap—so cheap that father will

be more than astonished, and the place is so lovely, and I am enjoying it greatly. Can you put me up and give me what food I require for a pound a week, Mrs. Aylmer?"

"It will be riches," said Mrs. Aylmer, with tears in her eyes. "The fact is, I can feed you both comfortably for ten shillings a piece, and the rest will be clear profit: fifteen shillings over for clear profit. Why, I won't know myself. I might be able to buy some new clothes; for I declare, my [Pg 16] dears, I am shabby, having turned and turned and contrived and contrived until my clothes are past wearing. Your aunt has not sent me a box of her cast-offs for over a year, and I think it is extremely unkind of her."

"But you have not told me yet where you slept last night, dear Mrs. Aylmer," said Kitty.

"Well, dear, if you must know, I slept here in this room. I slept on the dining-table. I borrowed some extra pillows from a neighbour, or, rather, Sukey borrowed them for me, for it would never do for my friends to suppose that I have not got abundance of pillows in my own house. I have had quite a luxurious night, my dear girls; so pray don't trouble about me."

Kitty looked somewhat inclined to cry, but Florence burst out laughing. She jumped up, went to her mother, and put her arms round her neck.

"You dear little Mummy," she said; "you are too comical for anything."

"There is no doubt whatever," replied Mrs. Aylmer, in answer to this caress, "that God Almighty makes us each in the most useful shape and form. Now, you are big, Florence, and could never manage on a table, but a little woman like me—why, it comes in most handy. Everything is arranged for the best, and so I always say." Here she glanced around her with her black eyes full of merriment, and certainly she looked as happy, notwithstanding her uncomfortable bed, as woman could look.

"I thought of sharing the kitchen with Sukey," she said; "but she won't stand any disarrangement of her habits, so there was nothing but the table, and if you think that it isn't worth that small [Pg 17] discomfort for the sake of having you two bright young things about the house, and the neighbours remarking on you and wondering how I am managing, and I with fifteen shillings a week to the good in my pocket, why, you don't know your mother, Florence Aylmer."

"Well, Mummy, and what was that thought you said you had in the back of your head?" continued Florence.

"Oh, that," said Mrs. Aylmer—here she looked at both girls. "I wonder, Kitty Sharston," she said, "if you can keep a secret?"

"Try me, Mrs. Aylmer," replied Kitty.

"Well, I was thinking things over in the night, and it struck me that the very best possible way to punish my sister-in-law, Susan Aylmer, and have everything that was wrong put right, is for you, Florence, to secure the young man, Maurice Trevor, as your husband."

"Oh, mother, how can you talk such nonsense?" said Florence. "As if I would," she added, jumping to her feet and shaking the crumbs from her dress.

"There," said Mrs. Aylmer, "that's just like you. I have been planning it all. You have but to show the fascinations which all women ought to possess, and you will soon twist him round your little finger."

"I could never, never think of it, mother; and I am distressed that you should say it, and more particularly before Kitty," was Florence's answer.

Mrs. Aylmer laughed.

"Girls always say that," she remarked, "but in the end they yield to the inevitable. It would be a splendid *coup*; it would serve her right. She would be forced to have you living with her after all. [Pg 18] I am told she has made the young man the heir of all she possesses, and—but what is the matter, my dear?"

"I really won't listen to another word," cried Florence, and she jumped up and ran out of the room.

Mrs. Aylmer's eyes now filled with tears. She looked full at Kitty.

"I don't know what is the matter with Florence," she said. "I had hoped that that dreadful thing which happened years ago had subdued her spirit and tamed her a trifle, but she seems just as obdurate as ever. It was such a beautiful idea, and it came over me in the night, and I thought I would tell Florence at once, and we might put our heads together and contrive a means by which the young folks could meet; but if she takes it up in that dreadful spirit, what is to be done?"

"But, of course, Mrs. Aylmer, it would never do," said Kitty. "How can you think of such a thing for a single moment?"

CHAPTER III.

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A STARTLING MEETING.

Kitty went out soon afterwards and joined Florence on the beach. They walked up and down, chatting eagerly. For a time nothing whatever was said about Mrs. Aylmer's queer suggestion; then suddenly Florence spoke of it.

"There is one thing I ought to say, Kitty."

"What is that?" asked Kitty.

"You must never mind the little Mummy's oddities. She has lived alone on extremely circumscribed means for many years, and when she gets an idea into her head she broods on it."

"You mean, of course, what she said with regard to Mr.—Mr. Trevor," said Kitty, flushing as she spoke.

"Yes, it wasn't nice of her," said Florence, with a sigh; "and we won't either of us think of it again. Kitty, I have made up my mind not to marry."

"Why so?"

"For a great many reasons. One of them is that I vastly prefer my independence. Another is that I do not think a rich nice man is likely to come in my way, and I do not want to have anything to do with a poor man, whether he is nice or nasty. I have seen too much of poverty. I have had it close [Pg 20] to me all my days. I mean to do well in the world: to be beholden to no one. In a fortnight's time I am going to London. I am just taking this one fortnight of rest and refreshment: then I go to London. I have in my trunk half a dozen introductions to different people. I mean to use them; I mean to get something to do; I mean to step from the lowest rung of the ladder up to the highest. I mean to be a success: to prove to the world that a girl can fight her own battles, live her own life, secure her reward—be, in short, a success."

"Why, Florence," said her companion, "how well you speak; how excited you look!"

"I have not gone through all I have gone through in my life for nothing," was Florence's reply. "I will never scheme again, I will never again do anything underhand, and I will not marry the man my mother has singled out for me."

She had scarcely said the words before the attention of both girls was arrested by the sound of a merry laugh not ten yards away. They both looked round, and Florence's cheeks first of all grew vivid and then turned white. A gracefully-dressed woman, or rather girl, was crossing the sands, accompanied by a young man in a grey suit. The man had broad shoulders, closely-cropped, rather fair hair, a sweeping moustache, and eyes as blue as the sky. He had a nice, open sort of face. He was tall, nearly six feet in height, and held himself as erect as a grenadier. He was bending towards the girl and talking to her, and the girl continued to laugh, and once she glanced with a quick, darting movement in the direction where Kitty and Florence were sitting. [Pg 21] Then, touching her companion on the arm, she said: "I am tired; will you take me back to the hotel?"

Neither Kitty nor Florence said a word until the pair—the good-looking, well-set-up young man and the girl in her pretty summer dress—disappeared from view. Then Florence turned to Kitty.

"It is?" said Florence.

Kitty nodded.

"Who would have believed it?" continued Florence. She started up in her excitement.

"I do not think I can quite stand this," she said.

"But where has she come from?" said Kitty again.

"How can I tell? I never want to see her wicked face again."

"She looks just as young as she did six years ago," said Kitty. Then she added impulsively: "I am sorry I have seen her again; I never could bear her face. Do you think her eyes were set quite straight in her head, Florence?"

"I don't know anything about that," answered Florence recklessly. "Long ago she did me a great deal of harm. There came a time when I almost hated her. Whether her eyes are straight or not, her mind at least is crooked. Who is that man she is with?"

"He is good-looking and looks nice also," said Kitty.

Florence made no reply. The girls paced up and down together; but somehow the edge of the day's enjoyment seemed gone. They went in to their midday meal between twelve and one, and afterwards Kitty, who said she felt a little tired, went to lie down. Florence, however, was still restless and perturbed; she hated the thought of the vicinity of Bertha Keys, and yet she had a [Pg 22] curious longing to know something about her.

"I am not going to fight shy of her or to show her that I am in the least afraid of her," thought Florence; "I can make myself much more disagreeable to her and much more dangerous than she can ever make herself to me. I wonder where she is staying?"

Mrs. Aylmer proposed that she and her daughter should spend the afternoon on the sands.

"Let us visit the shrimp-woman and get some fresh shrimps and perhaps a crab or a lobster for supper," said the little Mummy, holding out a bait which would have quite won the day in the old times. But Florence had outgrown her taste for these special dainties.

"I want to go out alone, Mummy," she said; "you and I and Kitty can have a walk after tea, but just for the present I must be alone." She pinned on her hat, put on her gloves, and left the cottage.

Mrs. Aylmer stood in the porch and watched her.

"A good girl, a fairly good-looking girl too," she said to herself, "but obstinate, obstinate as a mule. Even that trouble of long ago has not tamed her. She is the image of her poor dear father; he always was a man with a desperate will of his own."

Miss Aylmer watched Florence until she disappeared in the direction of the pier. There was a bench there, and a girl was seated on it. She wore a pink dress of some washing material and a large black shady hat. Florence came nearer and nearer. The girl, who was reading a book, dropped it and gazed in her direction. Presently Florence found herself within less than two hundred yards from the place where the other girl was seated. At this moment the girl flung down her book, uttered a hasty exclamation, and came forward. [Pg 23]

"Is it or is it not Florence Aylmer?" she said. She held out both her hands, uttering a little cry of apparent pleasure.

Florence did not notice the outstretched hands. She came up to her.

"I have come on purpose," she said; "I knew you were here. What are you doing here?"

"Why should I tell you what I am doing?" replied Bertha. Her eyes slightly contracted, she pushed her hair away from her forehead, then she looked full at Florence and uttered a laugh. "What is the good of quarrelling?" she said. "We have met. I am in the running; you are out of it. I am up and you are down. My prospects are first-rate, yours——"

"What do you mean? How can you tell anything about my prospects? Why do you trouble me? Why did you come to meet me just now?"

"Speak the truth," said Miss Keys; "were you not coming on purpose to see me?"

Florence was silent for a moment.

"I recognised you this morning," she said, "and I was restless to know why you were here."

"Ah, curiosity, you are Eve's own daughter," said Bertha Keys, with a laugh. "Well, now that we have met, we may as well talk the thing out. Can you deny that you are down and I am up?"

"I neither deny nor affirm your statement," replied Florence. "I have never heard of you—I have never mentioned your name since that dreadful day at Cherry Court six years ago." [Pg 24]

"Six years this autumn—not quite six years yet," replied Bertha, correcting her. "Yes, I too remember the day," she said thoughtfully. "It seemed a bad day for me, and yet it was a good one. I have feathered my nest. You stepped out of it and I stepped in. Do you understand?"

"I don't."

"You have grown a good deal, Florence Aylmer," said Bertha, looking her all over. "You are what would be called a fine young woman. If you had had the advantages of a refined life, of very good dress, you might, now that you are grown up, command almost any future. As it is"—she shrugged her shoulders.

"What is the matter with my dress?" said Florence; "you always were queer and rude, Bertha, and time has not improved you."

"You cannot say that I am badly dressed," said Bertha Keys, and she glanced at her exquisitely-cut pink zephyr skirt, her pretty blouse, and her neat shoes.

Florence also eyed her all over.

"You are well got up," she said; "but what of that? Your face never changes."

"Thank you for the compliment," replied Bertha; "I cannot say that you are well got up, and your face, if it has changed, is not more beautiful than it promised to be."

"Pray leave my face alone; it belongs to me, not to you," retorted Florence, with some spirit.

"Do you want to know what I am doing now: how I am managing to live?" said Bertha. [Pg 25]

"You can tell me if you please; if you prefer not to say anything, it does not matter in the least."

"But it does matter; it matters a good deal," replied Bertha. "You did something very silly long ago. You thought to succeed, but you failed. It was not my fault. I did what I could for you. If I was clever then, I am still more clever now. I have a gift of writing, but I need not wear my brain out thinking of curious essays and well-devised stories and clever plots. I am working at my own story, and I think it will come off well."

"But what do you mean? Where are you?"

"We are staying at the 'Crown and Garter' for the present."

"We?" said Florence, in a questioning tone.

"Yes; how stupid you are! Have not you guessed! Mrs. Aylmer, Mr. Trevor, and I."

"You don't mean it?" said Florence, springing to her feet. "Aunt Susan! Are you staying with her?"

"Yes, and I fancy I am indispensable to her. I have lived with her for nearly six years. I manage her affairs; I write her letters; I attend to her business; she consults me about everything. She goes where I like; she does what I want. The nest is comfortable. It was meant for you, but it fits me. Now perhaps you know."

"And Mr.—Mr. Trevor?" said Florence, in a trembling voice.

"Oh, he fits me too. He is a very good fellow, very nice indeed. He thinks I am quite an angel; he admires my talent, as he calls it. I believe he would be very sad if I were not there; he is much more likely to go than I am. Yes, Florence, you did well for me when you lost that Scholarship. I thought I would tell you." [Pg 26]

"Oh! oh!" said Florence, trembling and turning pale; "but if Aunt Susan knew! If she knew!"

"Yes, if she knew," said Bertha, "but she does not know, and of course you won't tell her."

"You think I won't; but—but Mummy will."

"I don't think so. It would be much worse for yourselves if you did. I can hoodwink her; I can turn her against your mother; I can make her more bitterly opposed to you. Now you have to understand. I have long felt that I must come to an understanding with you. You must keep silence. If you speak you will do very little good, but it is possible you may give me an uncomfortable half-hour. Now, I don't care to have an uncomfortable half-hour, and, above all things, I don't want Mr. Trevor set against me."

"Do you—do you mean to marry him?" said Florence abruptly.

Bertha Keys coloured very faintly.

"You are impertinent," she said; "I refuse to answer. I am comfortable where I am, and I mean to stay there. If you put Mr. Trevor against me, if you put Mrs. Aylmer against me, it will be all the worse for yourself; but if, on the other hand, you respect my secret, I can make things perhaps a shade more comfortable for you."

"Oh, oh, Bertha, no," said poor Florence. She covered her face—her cheeks were crimson. "I hate you! I can never be your friend. Why did you come here?"

"I came on purpose. I have not lost sight of you. You know something about me which I do not want the world to know. You could make things uncomfortable for me. I guessed that you would be coming here about now, and Mrs. Aylmer, Mr. Trevor, and I came to the 'Crown and Garter' at my suggestion. We will leave again the day after to-morrow; but not—not until you have made me a promise." [Pg 27]

CHAPTER IV. [Pg 28]

AN EVIL GENIUS.

After Bertha said the last words, Florence was quite silent. Bertha turned and looked at her; then, satisfied with what she saw or fancied she saw in her face, she turned aside again, giving a faint sigh as she did so.

"It was a narrow shave," she said to herself; "this had to be. If she took it in one way all was lost; but she won't take it in that dreadful way: she will protect me for her own sake. The girl who could stoop to deceit, who could use my assistance to gain her own ends six years ago, is not immaculate now. I can use her in the future; she will be extremely useful in many ways, and my secret is absolutely safe."

So Bertha leant back against the bench, crossed one prettily-shod foot over the other, and looked out across the summer sea. Presently Florence spoke in a low tone.

"Good-bye," she said. She rose as she uttered the words.

"Why do you say that? Sit down again. We have come to no terms."

"We cannot come to any," answered Florence, in still that low, almost heart-broken voice. Then, all of a sudden, without the least warning, she burst into tears.

"You bring the past back to me, Bertha," she said: "the hateful past." [Pg 29]

"It is very silly of you indeed to cry," said Bertha; "and as to the past, goodness knows it is dead and buried deep enough unless you choose to dig it out of its grave. Leave it alone, Florence, and come to terms with me. Now, for goodness' sake stop crying!"

"I won't tell of you just at present," said Florence; "that is the only thing I can say now." Once more she rose.

"You had Kitty Sharston with you this morning," continued Bertha. "She recognised me too, did she not?"

"Yes, we both recognised you."

"I never did anything particular to injure her; I mean, everything came right for her," continued Bertha; "she could scarcely interfere. It is you whom I dread. You and your mother between you can do me harm; but, after all, even at your very worst I may not be deprived of my present comfortable home and my delightful future. But I do not choose to run the risk, so you must promise that you won't betray me."

"Does mother know that Mrs. Aylmer—that Aunt Susan is staying at Dawlish?" continued Florence.

"She probably knows it by this time. Mrs. Aylmer has written her a note asking her to call to see her. She won't see you, so don't imagine it."

"I don't want to see her."

"Before your mother accepts that invitation, I want you to secure her silence; or, stay," continued Bertha briskly, "I will see her myself." She thought for a moment over a new idea which had come to her. Her lips then broke into smiles.

"How stupid of me!" she said. "I never thought of your mother before; she is the very person. I will meet you to-morrow morning here, Florence, and then you can tell me what you decide. It will be all the better for you if you are wise: all the worse for you if you are silly. Now go home, as I see you are dying to do so." [Pg 30]

Florence turned away from her companion without even bidding her good-bye: her heart was in a tumult. She scarcely knew what to say or what to do.

She did not want to injure Bertha, and yet she hated to feel that she was in her present position. She disliked her as much as it was possible for her to dislike anyone.

"She makes me feel bad," thought the girl; "she brings back the dreadful past. Oh, I was a wicked girl; but she helped to make me so. She brings back the dreadful, dreadful past."

By the time she had reached her mother's cottage she resolved to tell her exactly what had transpired and to ask her advice.

"For the little Mummy must also have learned her lesson: the little Mummy will tell me what is right to do," thought the girl.

But when she entered the house Mrs. Aylmer was nowhere to be seen.

Sukey, on the contrary, came forward with an important manner.

"Well, Miss Flo," she said, "when you come to the place, that aunt of yours seems also to put in an appearance. Your mother has had a note from her. She is staying at the 'Crown and Garter,' and Mrs. Aylmer has gone up there to tea. No, you are not invited, Miss Flo, and sorry I am that you are not." [Pg 31]

"It doesn't matter, Sukey," replied Florence. She sighed as she spoke.

"Have you a bit of a headache, my dear?" asked the old servant.

"Yes, I think I have," answered the girl.

"I'll get you your tea, and the tea for the other pretty young lady too. You can have it in the porch. It's a lovely evening. It don't do for girls to have headaches; but there's nothing to set you right like a cup of tea."

Sukey bustled off to prepare the simple meal, and presently Kitty came downstairs. She was refreshed by her sleep and inclined to be merry with Florence. Florence, however, felt too anxious to talk much.

"What is the matter with you, Florry? Are you worried about anything?" asked the companion. "Oh, I suppose it is about that wretched Bertha Keys. What can she be doing here?"

"You'll be amazed when I tell you that I saw Bertha this afternoon," continued Florence. "Where do you think she is staying? What post do you think she has secured?"

"How can I tell?" answered Kitty, raising her brows almost with impatience; then she added, before Florence could utter a word: "I am afraid I don't greatly care. All you and I want is that she should not come into our lives."

"But she has come into my life once more," said poor Florence, clasping and unclasping her

strong white hands as she spoke. "I believe she is my evil genius. I quite dread her, and she has a power over me, and it has not lessened, although I have not seen her for six years. Do you know where she is staying?" [Pg 32]

"No."

"She is living with Aunt Susan Aylmer as her companion."

Kitty was so much startled by the news that she sprang to her feet.

"Never!" she cried.

"It is the case; she has been with Aunt Susan for years."

"But how did she get the post? From the little I have seen of your aunt, she is one of the most particular, fastidious women in the world."

"Trust Bertha to manage that," replied Florence, in a bitter tone; "but anyhow, she is very much afraid of me: she does not want me to see Aunt Susan, nor tell her what I know."

"And what will you do, Flo?"

"I am undecided at the present moment."

"I think you ought to tell her," said Kitty gravely.

"She won't see me, and I do dread making Bertha a greater enemy than she is at present."

"All the same, I think you ought to tell her," replied Kitty. She looked grave and earnest as she spoke.

"If I were you I would," replied Florence, with some bitterness; "if I were you I would never do a crooked thing, or think a crooked thought; but I am not made that way. I am different, quite different. She frightens me."

"Well, don't think any more of her just now. Take your tea and let us go out for a walk."

CHAPTER V. [Pg 33]

MAURICE TREVOR.

Florence's head ached sufficiently badly to make her inclined to follow Kitty's advice. The girls had just finished their tea when Mrs. Aylmer, with flushed cheeks, and wearing her very best turned-for-the-twentieth-time dress, entered the little room where they were seated.

"Well, well, girls," she said: "well, well, where do you think I have been?"

"I know, Mummy," said Florence.

"You know!" replied Mrs. Aylmer. "Who told you?"

"Sukey."

"I begged of her not; but really that woman can keep nothing to herself, and she is always agog to be first in the field. Your aunt is going to send me a trunk full of old clothes. I dare say some of them may be made to fit you, Flo."

"I do not think so, mother," answered Florence.

"Where is the use of being proud? She's a very fine figure of a woman still. She wears wonderfully, and she has a most charming secretary: a sort of companion, a delightful girl. She and I walked down together almost to this door. She is in your shoes, my poor Florence; but she is really a *very* nice girl." [Pg 34]

"I have seen her to-day, mother; I know who she is," said Florence gravely; "her name is Bertha Keys."

"Bertha Keys," replied Mrs. Aylmer; "Bertha Keys?"

"You know who Bertha Keys is, mother. She is the girl, the pupil teacher, who behaved so badly at Cherry Court School six years ago."

"Oh, we won't mention that affair; it is dead and buried; we are not going to dig it out of its grave," replied Mrs. Aylmer.

Florence did not reply. She looked full at her mother.

"Bertha has been saying something to her," she thought; "she has been trying to influence her. Those were almost Bertha's own words." She got up hastily.

"The fact is, mother, I do not care to talk of it," she said; "the whole thing has upset me very much."

"Well, darling, I cannot think that it is your affair. It is bitterly disappointing that you should have lost your Aunt Susan's patronage. How proud I should be of you now if you were really her adopted daughter."

"Why, no, mother, you would not see me; you forget that part."

"To be sure, how stupid I am!" said Mrs. Aylmer. "Well, your aunt was most agreeable to-day: not so stingy either. We had quite a nice little tea; and that young man I told you of, Mr. Trevor, he came in. He is a charming person, my dear; quite fascinating. I was much taken with him. I longed to ask him to call, but I saw that Susan would allow no liberties. He chatted to me all the time, and was so agreeable. I am quite delighted with him."

"We are going for a walk now, mother," said Florence. [Pg 35]

"Well, dear, do; you both look pale. I want you to get nice and sunburnt, and to have a right good time. Yes, I am quite pleased with my visit. There is no use in quarrelling with your relations, and Susan, the moment she looked at my poor turned skirt—it is shiny, is it not, Miss Sharston?—she spoke about that trunk of clothes which is to arrive next week. She turned to the charming Miss Keys, and asked her to collect them."

"And you stood it, mother; you really stood it," said Florence, the colour coming and going on her face.

"My dear, good girl, beggars cannot be choosers. I have been absolutely at my wits' ends for clothes since Susan has been so thoughtless. I not only stood it, but on the way home I gave Miss Keys a hint as to the sort of things I wanted. I told her to try and smuggle into the trunk one of your aunt's rich black silks. She said she thought she could manage it, as she has at least four or five at the present moment, and never can tell herself how many she has. I told Miss Keys to let it be four in the future, and send the fifth on to me, and she laughed. She is a very clever, agreeable girl, and said she thought it could be done. I am made. I'll astonish the neighbours this winter."

"Come out, Kitty," said poor Florence, turning to her companion. She felt that, fond as she was of the little Mummy, she could not endure any more of her society for the present.

The moment the girls had departed, Mrs. Aylmer, who was standing on tiptoe near the window to watch them as they went slowly away in the direction of the beach, turned abruptly, went to the [Pg 36] door of the little sitting-room, and locked it. She then put her hand into her pocket.

"Is it true? Have I the evidence of my own senses?" she thought. "I never met a nicer girl than Miss Keys. Of course, she did wrong years ago: but so, for that matter, did my own poor Florence. She really can be made of great use. That black silk will be invaluable, and...." Here the widow, from the depths of her pocket, brought out four sovereigns. "She says she can give me more by-and-by, and I am to influence Florence. Of course I will. Do I envy the poor child her post? By no means. As Florence cannot occupy it, as well she as another. That she is setting her cap at that handsome Mr. Trevor there is no doubt; but perhaps Florence can win him over her head. We will see about that. Anyhow, I am not going to injure the poor, dear girl, and I shall tell Florence so."

Mrs. Aylmer felt far too excited to sit down. From the depths of poverty she suddenly felt herself raised almost to a pinnacle of wealth, as she estimated it.

Four golden sovereigns and the faithful promise of one of Susan's best silk dresses. "There will be lots of odds and ends besides," thought the little widow. "I am made! I am made! Now, if I only could! if I only could!"

As she considered the possibility of a very definite line of action, she still continued to stand by the tiny window of the sitting room, and from this vantage-point she saw a young man in a grey tweed suit strolling slowly in the direction of the sea-beach.

"Mr. Trevor!" she said to herself; "Mr. Maurice Trevor, as gentlemanly-looking a young fellow as I [Pg 37] have seen for many a day. He reminds me of poor dear Florence's father. He had just that downright sort of air, and he was fond of sticking his hands into his pockets too—yes, and he used to whistle, as I see that young fellow is whistling. I am always told that whistling is a good sign: it shows a generous disposition. If I am not greatly mistaken, that young man Maurice Trevor is generous and open-handed; he'll suit me. Now, if I could only introduce them! Florence and Kitty Sharston are on the beach—Mr. Trevor is going down to the beach. I'll go and take a walk. It is a fine evening, and it will do me good."

No sooner had this thought come to Mrs. Aylmer than she bustled into the kitchen.

"Well, ma'am," said Sukey, in a cross voice, "have you washed up the tea-things yet? We're in a rare mull this afternoon with those two young ladies in the house, and I can't do more than I said I would do. You promised that the tea-things should be your care, ma'am; and are they washed up? That's what I want to know."

"Oh, my dear good Sukey, don't worry about the tea-things now," said Mrs. Aylmer. "I am in no end of a flurry. A beautiful new black silk dress is promised to me, Sukey, and I am made in other ways too. You wash them up, and I'll give you threepence; I will—I promise you."

"You can't afford it, ma'am. What's the good of promising what you haven't got?" said the

obdurate Sukey.

"I will; I declare I will, and I'll bring in something nice and tasty for supper. You wash the tea-things, there's a good soul!" [Pg 38]

Mrs. Aylmer scarcely waited for Sukey's very indignant reply. The next moment she was out of the house.

She could walk quickly enough when she chose, and she knew every yard of the ground. Soon she was on the beach. Mr. Trevor was walking slowly in front of her. He was smoking a cigarette, his straw hat was pushed slightly forward over his blue eyes, his hands were still in his pockets, he was looking straight ahead of him, and as he slowly sauntered forward he was thinking. His thoughts were evidently not quite to his taste, for he frowned now and then, and looked over the wide expanse of sands, and occasionally he stood quite still. Thus Mrs. Aylmer found it easy to catch him up. She did so with a little pattering run which was one of her characteristics.

"Good evening, Mr. Trevor," she said, in her cheerful tone.

He started when she spoke to him, turned to look at her, and then took off his hat.

"Good evening," he said; "I did not recognise you at first."

"No wonder, as you only saw me for the first time to-day. I am taking a stroll; it is very pleasant here in the evenings, is it not?"

"Very pleasant! It is a charming place," said Trevor.

Mrs. Aylmer considered for a moment whether she should proceed on her walk alone, or whether she should try to induce the young man to accompany her.

"I am looking for my girls," she said; "they went down on the beach half an hour ago. Did you happen to see them, Mr. Trevor, as you were walking?" [Pg 39]

"I have only just come out. I have not seen anyone," was his answer.

"Are you quite sure? I *know* they were going on the sands, my two girls, my daughter and her friend. I should like to introduce you to my daughter, Mr. Trevor."

"I should be pleased to know her," he answered, still speaking in that vague sort of way which showed that he was thinking of something else.

Mrs. Aylmer held both her hands before her eyes. Thus shaded from the evening sun, she was able to look long and steadily across the beach.

"I do declare I believe those two are the very girls we are looking for," she cried; "if you will come with me now (and I don't suppose you have anything special to do) I'll introduce you."

Trevor had, of course, no excuse to make. He was not interested in Mrs. Aylmer's daughter, nor in Mrs. Aylmer herself, but as well walk with her as alone. So the two stepped briskly across the sands.

"It was the greatest possible pleasure to me to meet you to-day," continued the little widow; "I am so glad that my poor sister-in-law has a bright young fellow like you to look thoroughly after her affairs."

"But I don't look after them," he said; "Mrs. Aylmer has been extremely good to me, but the person who manages her business affairs is that very clever young lady, Miss Keys."

"Oh, what a genius she is!" said Mrs. Aylmer; "a wonderful girl, quite charming." [Pg 40]

"Do you think so?" answered Trevor. He looked at the little widow, and the faintest dawn of an amused smile stole into his eyes.

"Do I think so? I am immensely taken with her," said Mrs. Aylmer. "She is, I know, the greatest comfort to my dear sister-in-law. How splendidly Susan wears, and how considerate she is! I don't know what I should do without her. Mr. Trevor, I will say it, you are a very lucky person to be such a favourite."

"Mrs. Aylmer has done a great deal for me," said the young man; "she has after a fashion adopted me."

"And you are very glad, are you not?"

"Yes, I am glad," he replied. "Is that your daughter?" he continued, as if he wished to turn the conversation.

"That is my dear daughter Florence." Mrs. Aylmer spoke excitedly.

Florence and Kitty Sharston were seated on the edge of a rock. Kitty was poking with her parasol at some sea-anemones which were clinging to the rock just under the water. Florence was gazing with a frown between her dark brows at her mother and the man who was by her mother's side. If she could have fled, she would, but Mrs. Aylmer, who knew Florence's ways to perfection, now raised her voice to a shrill scream.

"Stay where you are, Florence; I am coming to sit with you, so is Mr. Trevor; don't stir until we

come up."

Poor Florence's blush was so vivid that it was well it was too far off to be noticed. There was nothing for it, however, but to obey. Mrs. Aylmer came up in high good humour, and made the necessary introductions.

CHAPTER VI.

[Pg 41]

MRS. AYLMER'S STRATEGY.

"Now, this is cosy," said the widow, "quite what I call friendly. I love these impromptu little meetings; all the stiffness which generally surrounds a first introduction must vanish when four human creatures find themselves face to face with Nature in her grandest aspects. Look at those great rolling waves, Mr. Trevor, and tell me if you ever saw anything finer in its way."

"Oh, mother, don't be a goose," said Florence. Try as she would, she could not help laughing. That laugh settled the matter. Trevor looked into her dancing eyes, noticed how white her teeth were, and, moving a step nearer, sat down by her side.

"Do you know this place well?" he asked.

"It has been my home for the greater part of my life," was Florence's reply.

She felt inclined to be rude to Mr. Trevor. The man who was adopted by Aunt Susan, who was doubtless the chosen and confidential friend of Bertha Keys, could surely have no interest for her! But Trevor had a gentle and very polite manner. It never occurred to him that this somewhat showy-looking girl could dislike his company. He was good-looking himself, and accustomed to being made much of and petted a good deal by women, and before many minutes had passed, [Pg 42] Florence, in spite of herself, was chatting gaily with him.

She forgot that her mother had manœuvred in the most open and brazen way to secure this introduction; she forgot everything but the pleasure of talking to a fellow-creature, who seemed to understand her sentiments, and also to approve them. When a young man approves of a girl's ideas, when he likes to look into her face and watch the sparkle of her eyes, she must be one in a thousand if she does not find him agreeable, sympathetic, and all the rest.

Presently Trevor suggested that he and Florence should go down on the beach, cross some low-lying rocks, and find a certain pool, which at low water contained the most lovely of sea-anemones to be found anywhere round the coast.

"Oh, come too, mother; come too, Kitty," said Florence, as she jumped to her feet.

"No, my dear, I am much too tired," said Mrs. Aylmer. She clutched at Kitty's skirt as the young girl was about to rise, and pulled her back, to her own astonishment.

"Stay by me, Miss Sharston: I have much to say to you," remarked the widow.

Accordingly Florence and Trevor, Florence well knowing that Kitty had not been allowed to come with her, started on their tour of investigation alone. They found the sea-anemones and chatted about them, and Trevor asked Florence if she would like to begin to make a collection, and Florence began by saying "Yes," but finally refused the tempting offer which Trevor made to help her in the matter. [Pg 43]

"I am going to London in a few days," she said.

"To London?" he asked; "now, in this broiling weather?"

"Yes; why not? Don't you like London in August?"

"I never care for London at any time—in August it is particularly detestable," was his reply. "We are going to stay here for a day or two. I think you know Miss Keys; she told me that you were an old friend of hers."

"She was at the same school with me years ago," said Florence, flushing as she spoke. "Oh, do look at that beauty in the corner: a kind of dark electric-blue. What a wonderful creature! Oh, and that rose-coloured one near it! Sea-anemones are like great tropical flowers."

Meanwhile Mrs. Aylmer was consulting with Kitty.

"Shall we or shall we not ask him to supper?" she said. "What do you think?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Kitty. She looked at her companion with those innocent, wide-open grey eyes, which were her greatest charm.

"He has quite taken to Florence; don't you see for yourself?"

"Oh, yes; everyone takes to her," replied Kitty, with enthusiasm; "she is so nice and honest and downright."

Mrs. Aylmer sighed.

"She has had her troubles, poor child; but in the end things may come round in a most wonderful way. Do you know, I like him very much?"

"Like who?" asked Kitty.

"Really, Miss Sharston, you are a little silly—Mr. Trevor, Mr. Maurice Trevor, the adopted son of my wealthy sister-in-law, Susan Aylmer." [Pg 44]

"Oh, yes," said Kitty; "I forgot that you were talking about him."

"I was asking you, my dear, if you thought we might invite him to join us at supper."

"Why not?" said Kitty.

"Well, Sukey's temper grows worse and worse. We were going to have a very small supper, not what you could put a man down to; but if he were coming you and I might just whip round to the shrimp-shop and get a lobster: lobster with a nice salad is what young men delight in; and we might get a bottle of claret at the grocer's. If you would carry the lobster, I would bring the claret. It is an enormous expense to go to, but if in the end——"

"Oh, dear," said Kitty, rising. She looked at Mrs. Aylmer, and the colour rose in a delicate wave all over her pretty face. "Oh, I would not," she said; "I don't think Florence would like it—I am certain she would not. Oh, you know her: she will be rude; don't do it, please, please don't."

But if there was one person more determined than another to have her own way, it was the little Mummy. She had only vaguely considered the possibility of asking Mr. Trevor to partake of their humble meal when she first spoke of it; now that Kitty opposed it she made up her mind that by hook or crook she would convey him to their house. What a victory it would be! Susan Aylmer, her rich sister-in-law, waiting and wondering why her handsome and fascinating young protégé did not appear: Bertha Keys finding her meal very dull without him: both these ladies talking about him, and in their hearts of hearts longing for his society: and he all the time in the tiny [Pg 45] cottage, partaking of the humble fare of Mrs. Aylmer the less, with the naughty Florence close to his side, and the fascinating Kitty not a yard off. Oh, it was worth a struggle!

Mrs. Aylmer rose to her feet. A good stiff wind was beginning to blow, and she staggered for a moment as it caught her stout little person. Then she raised her voice: "Florence!"

"Yes, mother," said Florence, turning. She was a hundred yards away now, and Trevor was talking in a more fascinating way than ever about sea-anemones and their beauties.

"If Mr. Trevor would come back to supper with us, we should be much pleased to see him. I will expect you, dear, to bring him in, when you have done your little preambulation. So pleased if you will join us, Mr. Trevor."

All these words were shrieked on the sea-breeze. Florence made a reply which did not quite reach her mother's ears. Mrs. Aylmer shouted once more, and then, seizing Kitty's hand, turned in the direction of the little town.

"Now for the shrimp-woman and the grocer's shop," she said; "we must be as quick as possible. Sukey will be in a flurry: but never mind: it is worth the effort."

Poor Kitty had never felt more uncomfortable. Really there were times when the little Mummy was almost unendurable. A lobster was chosen, quite a nice expensive one; Kitty was desired to go to the nearest greengrocer's shop, in order to secure the crispest lettuce and half a pound of tomatoes; the bottle of claret was also bought, and, laden with these spoils, the girl and the elder [Pg 46] lady re-entered the tiny cottage.

"Now then, Sukey," called out Mrs. Aylmer, "brisk is the word. I have caught the most charming young man you ever heard of, and he is coming to supper with us."

Sukey stared at her mistress.

"What folly are you up to now, ma'am?" she asked.

"No folly at all, my dear Sukey. Here's six-pence for you; don't say anything about it. Make the salad as only you know how, and trim the lobster. I was considerate, Sukey, and I got things that really will not give you trouble. Kitty, my dear sweet little girl, help me to arrange the table. It will be supper in a bower—quite romantic. The young man will enjoy it; I am certain he will. Dear Flo! what it is to have a mother like me to look after her and see that she does not waste her opportunities."

"But," said Kitty, changing colour as she spoke, "do you really mean——"

"I mean that mum's the word at present," was Mrs. Aylmer's mysterious remark. "Help me, Kitty Sharston, like a good girl, and for goodness sake don't make yourself look too pretty to-night. I don't want him to turn his attention to you, I may as well say so frankly."

Kitty earnestly longed for the moment when she should leave Mrs. Aylmer's cottage.

The supper was prepared, however; everything was arranged; and then the two ladies stood by the window watching for the return of the truants, as Mrs. Aylmer was now pleased to call

Florence and Mr. Trevor. [Pg 47]

Presently she saw her daughter coming up the somewhat steep path alone.

"Flo, Flo, child, where is he? is he coming?"

"Oh, no, mother," said Florence.

"Did you give him my invitation?"

"I told him he was not to accept it," said Florence. "Oh, dear me, mother, don't be silly. But, I say, what a nice lobster, and I am so hungry."

CHAPTER VII. [Pg 48]

THE CHAINS BEGIN TO FRET.

Meanwhile Trevor went slowly back to the hotel. He had enjoyed his talk with Florence; he liked her brusque way, she did not flatter him, and she was, he considered, a particularly attractive-looking girl. In Mrs. Aylmer's society he was made a great deal of and fussed over, and when that happens to a young man he always enjoys the sort of girl who snubs him by way of contrast. He thought Mrs. Aylmer the less one of the most extraordinary women he had ever met; but as he liked Florence, and was in the mood for a bit of an adventure, he would gladly have accepted her mother's invitation to supper if she had not tabooed it.

"You are not to come," said Florence, looking at him with her wide-open frank dark eyes; "mother is the soul of hospitality, but we are very poor: we have nothing proper to give you for supper, and I for one would much rather you did not come."

"I do not in the least mind what I eat," he said, in a somewhat pleading tone, and he looked full at Florence with his blue eyes.

"Nevertheless, you are not to come; it is only my mother's way: she always goes on like that with strangers. I never allow people to accept her invitations." [Pg 49]

After this there was nothing more to be said, and Florence and Trevor bade each other a very friendly good-bye.

When Trevor reached the "Crown and Garter" he found that Mrs. Aylmer and Miss Keys were already at dinner. They had both wondered where he was, and Bertha Keys had been a little anxious and a little uneasy. When he came in, the faces of both ladies brightened.

"What makes you so late?" said Mrs. Aylmer, looking up at him.

"I had a bit of an adventure," he said. He drew his chair to the table. "There was a slight chance of my not coming in to supper at all," he continued. "I met that charming little lady who visited you to-day, Mrs. Aylmer."

"What?" said Mrs. Aylmer, dropping her knife and fork.

"I met her again, and she introduced me to her daughter and to another young lady who is staying with them. By the way, they are your relations, so the little lady told me, and she was very hospitable, and invited me to supper, and I should have been very glad to go if the young lady had not told me that I must not accept her mother's invitation."

Now, these remarks were anything but agreeable to Mrs. Aylmer, and still less did they suit Bertha Keys. Neither lady said anything, however, at the present moment, but each glanced at the other. After a time, Mrs. Aylmer stretched out her hand and touched Trevor on his sleeve.

"I am sorry you have made the acquaintance of Miss Florence Aylmer," she said. [Pg 50]

"Sorry? Why?" he asked. "I consider her a remarkably nice girl."

"I regret to have to inform you that she is anything but a nice girl. I will tell you about her another time. It is quite contrary to my wishes that you should have anything to do with her: you understand?"

Trevor flushed. He had a way of looking annoyed at times, and he looked annoyed now. His silken chains sometimes fretted him a great deal. He often wondered whether he had done right in allowing himself to become Mrs. Aylmer's adopted son. Bertha, however, gave him a warning glance, and he said nothing.

Presently dinner was over, and Bertha beckoned to him to join her on the balcony.

"Shall we go out on the sands?" she said. "I have something I want to say to you."

"But Mrs. Aylmer has something to say to me also—something about that particularly nice girl, Miss Florence Aylmer."

"She will not say it to you to-night; she has a headache, and I persuaded her to go early to bed. I

quite sympathise with you, too, about Florence; she is one of my greatest friends."

Trevor gave Bertha a grateful glance.

"I am so glad you like her," he said. "I was never yet mistaken about anyone, and I took to her frank ways. She looks like the sort of girl who will never deceive you."

Bertha gave a peculiar smile, which vanished almost as soon as it visited her face.

"Shall we meet, say, in twenty minutes," she said, "just by the pier? I must see Mrs. Aylmer to bed; but I can join you then." [Pg 51]

"Very well," he answered.

Bertha left the balcony, and Trevor, lighting a cigar, tried to soothe his somewhat ruffled feelings. He had never liked Mrs. Aylmer less than he did at that moment.

"It is horrid when a woman runs down a girl," he said to himself; "such bad form, and, as to this girl, it is impossible Mrs. Aylmer can know anything against her."

Presently he looked at his watch, and prepared to keep his appointment with Bertha. He liked Bertha Keys very much; she was always jolly and good-tempered, and she often tried to smooth over matters when there was any little difference between himself and Mrs. Aylmer. When he reached the pier he found her waiting for him. It was a moonlight night, and the young couple began to pace up and down.

"What is it?" he said at last. "Have you anything special to say?"

"I know you are in a bad humour, and I am not surprised," she said.

"Listen, Miss Keys," said Trevor. He dropped his cigar, and turned and faced her. "I often feel that I cannot stand this sort of thing much longer: it is like being in chains. I would much rather talk the matter out with Mrs. Aylmer, tell her I am very much obliged to her for her kind intentions with regard to me, but that I would sooner carve out my own career in life and be indebted to no one."

"And how silly that would be!" said Bertha. "But what do you want Mrs. Aylmer to do?" [Pg 52]

"To let me go. I feel like a captive in her train; it is not manly. I never felt more annoyed than when she spoke to me as she did this evening. It is horrid when a woman abuses a girl—such bad taste."

"You know how peculiar she is," said Bertha; "but you suit her better than anyone I know. You want her to give you money to allow you to live in town. I am sure I can manage it. I quite understand that you must hate being tied to her apron-strings."

"It is detestable," said the young man; "and if it were not for my own mother, who seems so happy about me, and so grateful to Mrs. Aylmer, I should break with her to-morrow."

"I quite sympathise with you," said Bertha. "You must have money, and you must go to town. You want to read for the Bar: I will see that it is arranged. Mrs. Aylmer is rich, but not rich enough for you to live all your life in idleness. It would break her heart now if you deserted her: she has gone through much."

"What do you mean?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Why does she dislike Miss Florence Aylmer?"

"I would rather not say."

"But she will tell me herself."

"I shall beg of her not to do so."

"By the way," said Trevor, after a pause, "is this girl Mrs. Aylmer's niece?"

"She is her niece by marriage. Mrs. Aylmer's husband was Florence Aylmer's uncle."

"Then in the name of all that is just," cried Trevor impetuously, "why should I have the fortune which is really meant for Florence Aylmer? Oh, this is unendurable," he cried; "I cannot stand it. I will tell Mrs. Aylmer to-morrow that I am obliged to her, but that I will not occupy a false position." [Pg 53]

"You will do fearful harm if you make such a remark," said Bertha. "Something very sad happened a few years ago, something which I cannot tell you, but——" Bertha's lips quivered and her face was very pale.

"What is it? Having told me so much, you must go on."

Bertha was silent for a moment.

"What has Miss Aylmer done? If there is a frank, open-hearted, nice-looking girl, she is one. I do not care so much for her mother, but Miss Aylmer herself—I defy anyone to throw a stone at her."

"I own that she is a nice girl, a very nice girl; but once, once—well, anyhow, she managed to offend Mrs. Aylmer. You must not ask me for particulars. I want you to be most careful; that is why I have brought you out here to-night. I want you to be most careful to avoid the subject with Mrs. Aylmer. Florence offended her, and she has resolved never to see her and never to speak to her again. She is annoyed at your having made her acquaintance, and I doubt not we shall leave Dawlish to-morrow on that account. Be satisfied that Florence only did what perhaps another girl equally tempted would have done, but it was——"

"It was what? The worst thing you can do is to throw out innuendoes about a girl. What did she do?"

"She was not quite straight, if you must know—not quite straight about a prize which was offered in the school where she was being educated." [Pg 54]

"She told me that you were a teacher in the same school."

"Did she?" said Bertha. Her face turned pale, but her companion was not looking at her at that moment. "Ah, yes, poor girl: that is how I happen to know all about it. It was hushed up at the time, and of course Florence has quite retrieved her character. It was nothing whatever but what a girl tempted as she was would do, but it settled her as far as Mrs. Aylmer was concerned, and if you do not wish to bring fresh trouble upon the niece you will avoid the subject with her aunt. That is what I wished to say to you."

"How can I avoid it? It is quite impossible for me to be long with Mrs. Aylmer and prevent her speaking about what she has made up her mind to tell me."

"I have been thinking of that," said Bertha; "the very best thing you can do is to go up to London to-morrow morning."

"I go to London to-morrow?"

"Yes; go away for the present. I will tell her that you have had sudden news of your mother: that she wants to see you; or you can leave her a note to that effect."

"But it would not be true." Trevor darted a keen glance at his companion.

Bertha coloured again.

"It is difficult to manage with people who are as quixotically straight as you are," she said, after a pause; "I want you to keep away for your own sake. If what I have suggested does not please you, think of something else." [Pg 55]

"I will tell her that I wish for a change: that is true enough," he answered; "but how will that help me? When I come back, she will tell me the thing you do not wish me to hear about Miss Aylmer."

"Oh, I never said I did not wish you to hear it: I think it would be better for your peace of mind not to hear it: that is all. I have said that it was a little shady: that it happened years ago: that Florence has quite retrieved her character."

Trevor stamped his foot impatiently.

"I will not go away to-morrow," he said, after a pause. "I should like to see Miss Florence Aylmer again. I will ask her to tell me frankly what occurred some years ago."

"You will?" said Bertha, and now her face looked frightened.

"Yes," he answered, looking full into her eyes; "I will. She is perfectly honest. She can excuse herself if necessary. Anyhow, she shall have the chance of telling her own story in her own way."

CHAPTER VIII. [Pg 56]

BERTHA'S QUANDARY.

It was by no means the first time that Bertha Keys had found herself in a quandary. She was very clever at getting out of these tight corners: of extricating herself from these, to all appearances, impossible situations; but never had she been more absolutely nonplussed than at the present moment.

When she and Florence had both left Cherry Court School her prospects had been dark. She had been dismissed without any hope of a character, and had, as it were, to begin the world over again. Then chance put Mrs. Aylmer the great in her way. Mrs. Aylmer wanted a companion, a clever companion, and Bertha was just the girl for the purpose. She obtained the situation, managing to get references through a friend, taking care to avoid the subject of Cherry Court School, and never alluding to Florence Aylmer.

Mrs. Aylmer was very sore and angry just then. She disliked Florence immensely for having disgraced her; she did not wish the name of Florence Aylmer to be breathed in her presence; she was looking around anxiously for an heir. With Bertha Keys she felt soothed, sympathised with,

restored to a good deal of her former calm. By slow degrees she told Bertha almost all of her history; in particular she consulted with Bertha on the subject of an heir. [Pg 57]

"I must leave my money to someone," she said; "I hate the idea of giving it to charities. Charity, in my opinion, begins at home."

"That is does, truly," answered Bertha, her queer green-grey eyes fixed on her employer's face.

"And Florence Aylmer being completely out of the question," continued Mrs. Aylmer, "and Florence's mother being about the biggest fool that ever breathed, I must look in another direction for my heir."

"Why not adopt a boy?" said Bertha, on one of these occasions.

"Adopt a boy? a boy?"

"Well, a young man," said Bertha, colouring.

"What a very extraordinary idea!" was Mrs. Aylmer's response. She looked withering things at Bertha, and this young lady found herself more or less in disgrace for the next few days. Nevertheless, the idea took root. Mrs. Aylmer, having found girls failures, began to think that all that was desirable might be encompassed in the person of a boy.

"It would be nice to have a boy about the house. They were cheerful creatures. As they grew to be men, they were more or less a protection. Boys, of course, had none of the small ways of girls. A deceitful boy was a creature almost unknown."

So Mrs. Aylmer thought, and she began to look around for a suitable boy to adopt and leave her money to. No sooner did she seriously contemplate this idea than the opportunity to adopt a very special boy occurred to her. She had an old friend, a great friend, a woman whom as a girl she [Pg 58] had really loved. This woman was now a widow: she was a certain Mrs. Trevor. She had married an army man, who had died gloriously in battle. He had won his V. C. before he departed to a better world. His widow had a small pension, and one son. Mrs. Trevor happened just about this very time to write to Mrs. Aylmer. She told her of her great and abiding sorrow, and spoke with the deepest delight and admiration of her boy.

"Send Maurice to spend a week with me," was Mrs. Aylmer's telegraphic reply to this epistle.

In some astonishment, Mrs. Trevor packed up her boy's things—he was a lad of eighteen at this time—and sent him off to visit Mrs. Aylmer in her beautiful country place.

Maurice Trevor was frank, innocent, open as the day. He pleased the widow because he did not try to please her in the least. He liked Bertha Keys because all apparently amiable people suited him, and Bertha certainly did look distinctly amiable. Soon she got into his confidence, and he talked of his future. He wanted to go into the army, as his father had done before him. Bertha suggested that he should tell his desire to Mrs. Aylmer. This Maurice Trevor would not think of doing. He spent a week, a fortnight, a month with the widow, and went back to his mother, having secured a great deal more than he bargained for in the course of his visit.

Mrs. Aylmer now wrote to Mrs. Trevor, said that she liked Maurice very much, that she had no heir to leave her money to, and that if Maurice really turned out quite to her satisfaction she would make him her future heir. He must live with her during the holidays; he must give up his [Pg 59] mother's society, except for a very short time in the year; he must be thoroughly well educated; must, on no account, enter the army; and must have a University education.

These terms, generous in themselves, were eagerly accepted by the all but penniless widow. She had some difficulty, however, in persuading young Trevor to, as he expressed it, sell his independence. In the end her wishes prevailed. He went to Trinity College, Cambridge, took honours there, and now at four-and-twenty years of age was to a certain extent his own master, and yet was more tied and fettered than almost any other young man he knew. To tell the truth, he hated his own position. Mrs. Aylmer was capricious; she considered that he owed her undying gratitude: that he should only do what she wished. He had little or no control of her affairs, Bertha Keys being the true mistress.

At the time when this story opens he felt that he could scarcely stand his silken fetters any longer.

Bertha, as she stood now in the moonlit window of her little room at the "Crown and Garter," thought over Maurice Trevor, his future prospects, and his past life. She also thought about Florence.

"From the way he spoke to-night," thought this astute young woman, "very, very little would make him fall in love with Florence. Now, that is quite the very last thing to be desired. It would be a sort of revenge on Mrs. Aylmer, but it cannot be permitted for a single moment. They must not meet again. There are several reasons against that. In the first place, it would not suit my convenience. I mean to inherit Mrs. Aylmer's property, either as the heiress in my own person or [Pg 60] as the wife of Maurice Trevor. It is true that I am older than he, but I have three times his sense: I can manage him if another girl does not interfere. He must leave here immediately. I must make

some excuse. His mother is not quite so quixotic as he is; I must manage things through her. One thing, at least, I am resolved on: he must not hear the story of Florence—at least, not through Florence herself: he must not meet her again, and Mrs. Aylmer must not tell him the story of what occurred at Cherry Court School."

Bertha thought a very long time.

"If he really falls in love with Florence, then he must no longer be Mrs. Aylmer's heir," she said to herself; "but he shall not meet her. I like him: I want him for myself; when the time comes, I will marry him. He shall not marry another woman and inherit all Mrs. Aylmer's property."

Bertha stayed up for some time. It was between two and three in the morning when at last she laid her head on her pillow. She had gone through an exciting and even a dangerous day, but that did not prevent her sleeping soundly. Early in the morning, however, she rose. She was dressed before seven o'clock, and waited anxiously for eight o'clock, the time when she might send off a telegram. She procured a telegraph form and carefully filled it in. These were the words she wrote:—

> "Make some excuse to summon Maurice to London at once. Must go. Will explain to you when writing. Do not let Maurice know that I have telegraphed.—Bertha Keys."

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This telegram was addressed to Mrs. Trevor, Rose View, 10 St. Martin's Terrace, Hampstead. Punctually as the clock struck eight, Bertha was standing at the telegraph-office; it was so early that she knew the line would be more or less clear. She sent off her telegram and returned with a good appetite to breakfast.

At about ten o'clock a telegram arrived for Trevor. He was eating his breakfast in his usual lazy fashion, and was inwardly wondering if he could see Florence again: if he could lead up to the subject of the school where she had suffered disgrace: and if she herself would explain to him that which was making him far more uncomfortable than the occasion warranted.

"A telegram for you," said Bertha, handing him the little yellow envelope. He opened it, and his face turned pale.

"How queer!" he said; "this is from mother; she wants me to come up to-day: says it is urgent. What shall I do, Miss Keys?"

"Why, go, of course," said Bertha; "here is Mrs. Aylmer. Mrs. Aylmer, Mr. Trevor has had an urgent telegram from his mother. She wants to see him."

Mrs. Aylmer looked annoyed.

"I wanted you to come with me this morning, Maurice," she said, "on an expedition to Warren's Cove. I thought you might drive me in a pony carriage."

"I can do that," said Bertha, in her brisk way.

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"Of course you can, my dear, if Maurice feels that he really must go.—When can you be back again?"

"I will try and return to-morrow," said Trevor; "but, of course, it depends on what really ails mother. From the tone of her telegram I should say she was ill."

"And I should say nothing of the kind," answered Mrs. Aylmer shortly; "she is one of those faddists who are always imagining that they require——"

"Hush!" said Trevor, in a stern voice.

"What do you mean by 'hush?'"

"I would rather you did not say anything against my mother, please."

He spoke with such harshness and such determination that Bertha trembled in her shoes, but Mrs. Aylmer gave him a glance of admiration.

"You are a good boy to stand up for her," she said; "yes, go, by all means: only return to me, your second mother, as soon as you can."

"Thanks," he answered, softening a little; but the gloomy look did not leave his face.

"I will walk with you to the station, Mr. Trevor," said Bertha, who thought that he required soothing, and felt that she was quite capable of administering consolation.

"Thanks," he replied; "I shall ask the station porter to call for my portmanteau."

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CHAPTER IX.

A TEMPTING OFFER.

By the next train Bertha saw Maurice Trevor off to London. When she had done so, she went slowly in the direction of the sands. She had induced Mrs. Aylmer to put off her drive until the afternoon. Bertha was now very anxious to see Florence.

In all probability Florence would be on the beach: she would know that Bertha was coming to get the answer which Florence had not given her the day before. She walked slowly, holding her parasol up to shade her face from the sun, and thinking her thoughts.

"At any rate, Maurice Trevor is safe for the day," she said to herself; "and before the evening has passed, I shall have Florence's promise that she will not betray me to Mrs. Aylmer. Mrs. Aylmer is just the sort of person, if Florence made the worst of things, to turn against me and take Florence back again. Then indeed, she would be avenged, and I should be routed. Such a state of things cannot be."

Bertha thought quickly. Her thoughts turned to a little account which was weekly swelling in importance, and which stood to her credit in the Post Office Savings Bank. She was intensely fond of money, but she knew that the time had come when it might be necessary to sacrifice [Pg 64] some of her savings. Presently she gave a well-assumed start; said: "Hullo, Flo, is that you?" and went to meet Florence Aylmer.

Florence's face was quite pale, and her eyes were red as if she had been crying.

"Goodness!" said Bertha; "what does this mean? Have you had any domestic calamity since I saw you last?"

"No, not any except what you are making," replied Florence. "I wish you would go away, Bertha: I hate to see you again. I wish you would leave me in peace."

"Well, darling, we return to Aylmer's Court to-morrow, so you will not be long worried by us. I have just been seeing that nice young fellow, Maurice Trevor, off to town."

"Indeed," answered Florence.

"Don't you like him extremely?" continued Bertha, giving her companion a quick glance.

"I scarcely know him," replied Florence.

"But you do just know him. How did you become acquainted with him?"

"My mother introduced him."

"Ah! just like the little widow," said Bertha, in a thoughtful voice. "Well, Flo, you and I have a good deal to say to each other. Let us walk to the other end of the sands, where we shall be alone."

Florence hesitated. For a moment she looked as if she were going to refuse; then she said, in an almost sulky tone: "Very well." They turned in that direction and walked slowly. At last they reached the spot where Mrs. Aylmer had discovered Kitty and Florence the day before.

"It was here I first saw him," thought Florence Aylmer to herself. "What a true, good expression [Pg 65] he had in his blue eyes. How upright he looked! How different from Bertha! Oh, what a miserable wretched girl I am! Why do I not tell Bertha that I do not fear her? Why should I put myself in her power?"

At last they reached the rocks.

"It is nice here, and quite romantic," said Bertha; "we can come to our little arrangement. You have made up your mind, of course, Florence, that you will not speak to Mrs. Aylmer of what you know about me?"

"I do not see why I should keep your secret for you," said Florence; "I do not particularly want to injure you, much as you injured me in the past; but at the same time why should I make a promise about it? The time may come when it will be to my benefit to tell Mrs. Aylmer what I know."

"At the present moment she would not speak to you. She hates you as she hates no one else in the world. Your very name is as a red rag to her. If I want to rouse her worst passions, I have but to allude to you. Even if you told her, she would not believe a word against me."

"I am not so sure of that. Mrs. Aylmer may be forced to listen to me, and if you rouse my evil feelings I may tell her just to spite you, Bertha."

"But you will not," said Bertha. "You want money badly. You would like to be independent."

"That is quite true."

"You have had a fairly good education and you want to earn your own living?"

"I mean to earn it."

"But you will require a little money until you do. Now, look here, Florence: I don't want to injure [Pg 66] you. I know I did long ago; I did it for my own benefit. I was cast penniless on the world, and I was forced to invent all kinds of subterfuges to make my way. I pity girls who are placed as I was placed. I have now managed to get into a comfortable nest. As I said before, I am in your nest. It

suits me, and I do not mean to go out of it; but I pity you, and I should like to help you. Will you borrow a little money from me?"

"Borrow money from you? No, no," said Florence; but she trembled as she said the words.

"I can quite conveniently lend you fifty pounds," continued Bertha, gazing as she spoke across the summer sea. "It is not much, but it is something. With fifty pounds in your pocket you can go, say to London or to any other large town and advertise what you are worth. You have, I presume, something to sell: some knowledge, for instance, which you can impart to others; or perhaps you have a talent for writing. Don't you remember our wonderful essay?"

"Don't!" said Florence; "don't!" She covered her face with her hands; the crimson colour had flooded her face.

Bertha gave a queer smile.

"Now, I could earn money by writing essays," she said; "very smart essays they would be, and I could earn money by writing stories. Suppose, suppose I write stories still, and send them to you, and you publish them as your own—how would that do? Why should you not? I like writing stories, and I do not want money, and you could polish them up if you liked and sell them as your own. That is an excellent idea. Will you do it? I am quite agreeable. I will furnish you with a short [Pg 67] story, say, once a fortnight, or once a month. Will you take one with you and try to sell it as your own? I can do it in the evenings, and you shall have it. Don't you think that I am paying you well, now, to keep silence? I am offering you an honourable livelihood, and in the meantime there is the fifty pounds: you may as well have it; it will keep you until the money for the stories comes in, and you can pay me back when you like. I dare not appear before the world as a writer, for Mrs. Aylmer is hard to please, and she would not like me to write or to do anything but devote my time to her; but there are hours at night when she goes to bed which I can devote to your service. Now, what do you say? It seems to me to be a very good offer."

"It is a tempting offer, certainly," said Florence; "but I never thought of writing. I have no particular taste for it."

"Well, think it over," said Bertha, rising as she spoke, "and in the meantime I will send you the money this evening."

"Oh, I cannot take it; please don't."

"I will send it to you," said Bertha, in a gay voice; "it is quite arranged. Good-bye, dear; I wish you success. When you are a great writer we can cast up accounts and see on which side the balance lies. You quite understand? I have a gift in that way which I think can be turned to account. You will agree to do what I wish, will you not, Florence?"

"It is all horrible! I do not know what to say," answered Florence. [Pg 68]

"I see in your eyes that you mean to accept; you cannot help yourself. You cannot possibly starve, and you will find when you go to London that the posts of teachers and secretaries are overfull; but the writer of clever short stories can always find a market for his or her wares."

Florence rose to her feet.

"I don't like it," she said; "I am thoroughly miserable. I wish there were some other way; but there is not."

"Well, try for yourself before you think of the story part; but, anyhow, you must take the fifty pounds—you really must."

Bertha rose, touched Florence lightly on her cheek, and before the other girl could say a word turned and left her. She walked across the beach now with a dancing step.

"I have scored a point," she said to herself; "Florence won't dare to tell. She is as certain to accept that fifty pounds as she is to eat her breakfast to-morrow morning. After all, I am very generous to her; but I see my way, I think, to win Maurice Trevor. I see my way to prevent these two becoming friends, and at the worst, if Maurice does meet Florence again, and does fall in love with her, I shall take good care that he is not Mrs. Aylmer's heir. It is but to alter her will and heigh presto! the riches are mine!"

CHAPTER X. [Pg 69]

THE LITTLE MUMMY'S CURIOSITY.

Florence did not return to the cottage until past the usual dinner hour. When she did so, her mother, who appeared to be very much excited, met her in the porch.

"There has come a little parcel for you," she said, "from the 'Crown and Garter Hotel.' I wish you would open it; I am quite curious: it is sealed. The messenger did not want to leave it when I told him that you were out. He said it had been given him by Miss Keys to bring to you, and that he was to give it into your hands. I wonder what it can be?"

"Oh, it is nothing of importance," said Florence, turning quite pale. "Give it to me, please, mother."

"Nothing of importance, indeed!" said the little widow, tossing her head; "it seemed to me very much of importance. The messenger was quite fussed when he found you were not here: he said perhaps he had better take it back, but I assured him that I did not lose things when they were addressed to my only daughter, and that he might safely trust me to put the parcel into your hands. He was one of the waiters from the hotel—a very stylish-looking person indeed. What riches and what luck follow some people! Why should Miss Keys have everything and my poor girl be left out in the cold?"

"Oh, mother, I would not change with Bertha Keys for anything," said Florence; "but give me the parcel, please." [Pg 70]

"Here it is; you'll open it and assuage my curiosity."

"It is only a letter from Bertha; I quite know what it contains," said Florence. She got red first and then pale. Her mother's bright beady eyes were fixed on her face.

"Well, but can't you open it and tell me about it? You know how curiosity does eat into me: I can't sleep, I can't enjoy my food when there's a secret surrounding me. What's in the letter, Flo? If you are too tired to read it just now, I will open it for you."

"No, thank you, mother; I know what it contains: it is a message from Miss Keys. I met her on the sands this morning and—and she said she would write."

With a wild fluttering at her heart, Florence popped the sealed packet into her pocket and sat down near the door.

"I am thoroughly tired," she said, "and my head aches."

Mrs. Aylmer appeared to be annoyed and disappointed.

"I do declare," she exclaimed, "I don't think any of the girls of the present day have health worth mentioning. There's Kitty: she's been fretting and fuming because you went out without her; she's a nice, refined sort of little thing, but she has a headache, and now after preparing the very nicest little dinner out of the scraps which that young man ought to have eaten last night, you never came in to partake. I had lobster salad of the most recherché description, and you were not present, while Kitty could scarcely eat because of her headache, so I had to do justice to the mayonnaise myself; and now you come in looking washed out and wretched. I do declare," she concluded, "things are more comfortable for me when Sukey and I are alone." [Pg 71]

"Well, mother, I shall be leaving you shortly. I shall probably be going to London to-morrow or next day."

"So soon, after arranging to spend the holidays with me?"

"I have changed my mind about that now," said Florence restlessly; "I must work and begin to earn money."

"I have not a penny to give you to start with, you understand that."

"I have a little money," said Florence, and her face coloured and then turned pale: "I think I can manage."

"I wonder how," thought the widow. She glanced at Florence, but did not speak: a shrewd expression came into her eyes and she pursed up her lips.

"I will go and coax Sukey to make a cup of coffee for you," she said: "there is nothing like really strong coffee as a cure for a headache, and you can have some bread-and-butter. I am sorry to say I can afford nothing else for your dinner to-day."

"Oh, coffee and bread-and-butter will do splendidly," said Florence.

Her mother left the room. A moment later Kitty came down.

"Flo," she said, "I have just received a letter from father; he will reach Southampton to-morrow and I am to go and meet him there. Won't you come too?"

"Oh, may I go with you?" said Florence, sensibly brightening.

"May you? Of course you may; it will be so splendid to see him again, and you must constantly stay with me—constantly, Flo dear. Oh, I am so happy, so happy!"

CHAPTER XI. [Pg 72]

FLORENCE'S GOOD ANGEL.

"What is the matter, Flo?" said Kitty. The two girls were in their tiny bed-room. They were to

leave Dawlish the next morning, as Kitty had persuaded Florence to go with her to Southampton in order that they might both be present when Colonel Sharston once more set foot on his native land.

Kitty was very much excited, but she was too gentle and noble a girl, too absolutely unselfish, not to notice that her companion was distrait and anxious. No one could be much more worried than poor Florence was that evening.

All during the long day which had followed she had kept saying to herself: "Shall I or shall I not? Shall I take that fifty pounds from Bertha and put myself in her power for ever, or shall I return her the money, fight my way to fortune with the weapons which God has given me, and not descend to her temptations?"

One moment Florence had almost made up her mind to choose the right path, but the next instant the thought of the struggle which lay before her and the terrible adventures which any girl must meet who fights the world without money rose to weaken her resolve. It would be so easy to accept that fifty pounds, and Bertha would scarcely dare to ask her to repay it. She would at least have plenty of time to collect the money bit by bit, and so return it to Bertha; but [Pg 73] Florence knew well that if once she took that money she would lower herself forever in the moral scale.

"I should sink again to that sort of awful thing I was just before my great temptation at Cherry Court School," she thought. "I have managed to rise above that level now, and am I going to sink again?"

So she wavered all day long, the pendulum of her mind now swinging to one side, now to another. The result was that she felt quite worn out when night came.

"What is it?" said Kitty. "What is worrying you?"

"Oh, never mind," answered Florence. The tears rose to her eyes, she pressed her hands for a moment to her face, then she said abruptly: "Don't ask me."

"I will ask you. I have seen all day that you are wretched; you must tell me what has gone wrong with you."

"I am tempted, that is all," said Florence.

"Then do not yield to the temptation," was Kitty's answer; "if it is something you would rather not say to me——"

"No, Kitty, I must not tell you, but I am tempted strongly," answered Florence.

"The only thing to do, however hard the temptation, is not to yield to it," said Kitty.

Florence looked for a moment at her companion. Kitty, too, had known what it was to want for money. Kitty had been poor. It is true that, since the day she took the prize which Florence through deceit had lost, her kind friend, Sir John Wallis, had never ceased to shower small benefits upon her. She was not only his pet, but almost his idol. In his heart of hearts he felt that [Pg 74] he would like to adopt her, but he did not dare even to suggest such a thing, knowing how passionately she was attached to her father.

Now Colonel Sharston was returning to England, having been appointed to an excellent home post, and Kitty's money troubles were quite at an end.

"She will want for nothing in the future," thought Florence to herself as she looked at the graceful figure and bright beautiful face of the young girl who was standing a short distance away. "She will want for nothing: she will never know the real heartache of those who have to earn their daily bread. How can she understand?"

"Why are you looking at me like that, Flo?" said Kitty.

"Oh, I don't know; I don't know. I—sometimes I envy you. You have rich and powerful friends."

"Then it is money: I thought as much," said Kitty. "Listen to me, Florence. I am sure I can guess what is troubling you. That dreadful Bertha wants to bribe you to be silent: she has offered you money."

Florence's face turned quite pale.

"Give it back to her; you shall, you must! I know father will help you when he comes back. I will speak to him. You must not yield, Flo; you must not."

Florence stood irresolute.

"It is not too late," said Kitty. "We are both leaving here early in the morning. Has she sent you any money now?"

"Yes," said Florence. Her voice scarcely rose to a whisper. The word trembled on her lips.

"Then we will return it to her. You must not take it." [Pg 75]

"It is too late: I have taken it."

"It is not too late. What is the time? It is only half-past ten. I am quite certain that Miss Keys is not in bed yet. Come, Flo, put on your hat; your mother won't mind. We will take the latchkey and let ourselves in. We will go to the hotel and return the money."

"Oh, I dare not."

"Then I dare," said Kitty. "You have told me nothing, remember; but I will not let you sink or yield to this temptation."

Florence colored crimson.

"You have a great power over me," she said; "I feel as if you were my good angel, and Bertha were my bad."

"Then for heaven's sake, Florence, yield to the entreaties of your good angel. Come, come; the hotel won't be shut up. Where is the money?"

"In my pocket."

"Then come immediately."

Florence was inspired by Kitty, whose voice was strong, and her face brave and bright, as befitted one who lived for the right and rejected the wrong.

"I am glad," she said to herself; "I did not ask her counsel: she has forced it upon me. She is my good angel."

A moment later the two girls left the cottage. They walked quickly in the direction of the big hotel. There were lights in many rooms, servants walking about, and the hall-door was open. They walked up the steps, and Kitty entered the hall. Florence followed her, pale and trembling.

"Can I see Miss Keys?" asked Kitty of the hall porter. [Pg 76]

"I will enquire if Miss Keys is up still," replied the man. "What name shall I say?"

"Miss Sharston. I want to see her for a moment about something important."

"Will you come in, Miss?"

"No; perhaps she would see me here. Say also that Miss Florence Aylmer is with me."

The man withdrew. A moment later, Bertha, in her evening dress, looking pretty and excited, ran downstairs.

"What is it? What's the matter?" she said. "Is that you, Florence? Kitty, what is the matter?"

"We don't want to stay; we don't want you to tell Mrs. Aylmer, and we don't want to get you into trouble of any sort," said Kitty, speaking rapidly and drawing Bertha aside as she spoke. "But we want to give you this back, and to let you know that what you suggested was impossible—quite impossible."

As she spoke, she thrust the little packet which contained the fifty pounds into Bertha's hand, and then took Florence's.

"Come, Flo; I think that is all," she said.

Bertha was too stunned to say a word. Before she had recovered from her astonishment, the two girls had walked down the steps and gone out into the night.

"What does this mean?" said Bertha to herself. "I don't like it at all, but, thank goodness, we are leaving here to-morrow. I don't suppose Florence will really tell on me. I must discover some other way to get her into my power."

She went slowly back to the sitting-room. Mrs. Aylmer looked up discontentedly. [Pg 77]

"Who called to see you? I didn't know you had any friends in the town, Bertha?" she said.

"Nor have I, but a couple of young girls who are staying here called to return me a little packet which I had dropped on the beach to-day and lost. They found it; my name was on it, and they brought it back to me."

"Oh, indeed; I thought I heard the waiter say that Miss Florence Aylmer had called."

"You were mistaken, Mrs. Aylmer," replied Bertha, in her calm voice. She fixed her grey-green eyes on the widow's face, and took up the book which she had been reading.

"Shall we go on with this, or shall we have a game of two-handed patience?" she said quietly.

"I will go to bed," said Mrs. Aylmer; "I am tired and cross. After all, my life is very dull. You didn't manage to amuse me to-day, Bertha; you were not like your old self; and then I miss Maurice. He has become almost indispensable to me. I hope he will return to-morrow."

"We shall probably find him before us at Aylmer's Court."

"I shall send him a telegram the first thing to-morrow to ask him to hurry home," said Mrs. Aylmer. "He is such a pleasant, bright fellow that life is insupportable without him. You used to

be much more amusing than you are now, Bertha. Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing, my dear friend," said Bertha. She looked full at Mrs. Aylmer, and tears rose slowly to her eyes. Now, no one could possess a more pathetic face than Bertha when she pleased. Mrs. Aylmer was not a good-natured woman, she was not kind-hearted, she was not in any sense of the word amiable, but she had certain sentiments, and Bertha managed to arouse them. When she saw tears in her young companion's eyes now, she laid her hand on her arm. [Pg 78]

"What is it, dear? I should be sorry to be cross with you. You are a very good girl and suit me admirably."

"It was just the fear that I was not quite suiting you that was troubling me," replied Bertha. "Say that again, kind, dear benefactress, and you will make me the happiest girl in the world."

"No one ever suited me so well. You are surely not jealous of my affection for dear Maurice?"

"Oh, no; I love him myself," said Bertha.

Mrs. Aylmer looked grave. She rose slowly.

"Ring for my maid, will you, Bertha? I shall go to bed; I am tired," said the great lady.

The maid appeared a moment later, and the two left the room together. As Mrs. Aylmer slowly undressed, she thought of Bertha's last words: "I love him myself."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Aylmer to herself; "she is ten years his senior if she's a day; nevertheless, I must be careful. She is a clever woman; I should be sorry to have to do without her, but I often wonder what her past was. I made very few enquiries with regard to her history. I wanted someone to be with me at the time, and she took my fancy."

Downstairs Bertha slowly unfastened the little parcel and looked at the five ten-pound notes which were rolled up within.

"After all, it's just as well that I should have this money by me as that I should give it to Florence Aylmer," she said to herself. "I must think of some other way to tempt her, and the money will be useful. I shall put it back into the post-office and wait awhile. She is certain to go to London, and equally certain to fail. I can tempt her with some of my stories. I will manage to get her address. Yes, clever as you think yourself, Florence, you will be in my power, and before many weeks are over." [Pg 79]

CHAPTER XII. [Pg 80]

ALONE IN LONDON.

Florence and Kitty left Dawlish the next day and went to Southampton. There they met Colonel Sharston, and Florence had the great bliss of seeing Kitty's intense happiness with her father. They stayed at a hotel at Southampton for the best part of a week, and then the three went to London. Kitty and her father were going to Switzerland for a month's holiday. They begged of Florence to go with them, but nothing would induce her to accept the invitation.

"I know well that Colonel Sharston even now is far from rich," she said to herself. "I will not let Kitty feel that I have put myself upon her."

So very firmly she declined the invitation, and one short week after she had bidden her mother good bye at Dawlish she found herself alone in London. She had seen Kitty and Colonel Sharston off by the night train to Dover, and left the great railway-station slowly and sadly.

"Now I have to fight the battle. Shall I fail or shall I succeed?" she said to herself.

She had taken a bed-room in a large house which was let out in small rooms. It was one of the first houses that had been let out in flats for women in London, and Florence considered herself very fortunate in being able to take up her quarters there. There was a large restaurant downstairs, where the girls who lived in the house could have their meals provided at low prices. [Pg 81]

Florence's bed-room was fairly neat, but very small and sparsely furnished. It was an attic room, of course, for she could only afford the cheapest apartment. She had exactly twenty pounds wherewith to support herself until fortune's ball rolled her way. She felt confident enough. She had been well educated; she had taken certain diplomas which ought to enable her to get a good situation as a teacher; but if there was one thing which poor Florence disliked it was the thought of imparting knowledge to others. If she could obtain a secretaryship or any other post she would certainly not devote her life to teaching.

"It behooves me to be sensible now," she thought; "I must look around me and see what is the best thing to do."

That evening, after the departure of Kitty and her father, she retired to her bed-room. She had bought a little tea, sugar, bread, and butter, and she made herself a small meal. The prices at the restaurant were very moderate, but Florence made a calculation that she could live for a little

less by buying her own food.

"I will dine at the restaurant," she thought, "and make my own breakfast and get my own supper. I must make this twenty pounds go as far as possible, as I do not mean to take the first thing that offers. I am determined to get a secretaryship if I can."

That evening she wrote a long letter to her mother, and another to Sir John Wallis. She told Sir John that she was preparing to fight the battle in London, and gave him her address. [Pg 82]

"I am determined," she said in the letter, "not to eat the bread of dependence. I am firmly resolved to fight my own way, and the money you have given me is, I consider, a stepping-stone to my fortunes."

She wrote frankly and gratefully, and when Sir John read the letter he determined to keep her in mind, but not to give her any further help for the present.

"She has a good deal of character," he said to himself, "although she did fall so terribly six years ago."

Mrs. Aylmer the less also received a long letter from Florence. It was written in a very different vein from the one she had sent to Sir John. Mrs. Aylmer delighted in small news, and Florence tried to satisfy her to her heart's content. She told her about Kitty's dresses and Kitty's handsome bonnets and all the different things she was taking for her foreign tour.

She described her own life with the Sharstons during the few days she had spent with them at a London hotel, and finally she spoke of her little attic up in the clouds, and how economical she meant to be, and how far she would make her money go, and how confident she was that in the future she could help her mother; and finally she sent the little Mummy her warmest love, and folded up the letter and put it into its envelope and posted it.

That letter brought great delight to Mrs. Aylmer. It was indeed what she considered a red-letter day to her when it arrived, for by parcel post that very same day there came a large packet for her from Bertha Keys, sent straight from Aylmer's Court. This packet contained a wardrobe [Pg 83] which set the little widow's ears tingling, and flushed her cheeks, brightened her eyes, and caused her heart, as she expressed it, to bound with joy.

"Oh, Sukey, come and look; come and look!" she cried, and Sukey ran from the kitchen and held up her hands and uttered sundry ejaculations as she helped her mistress to turn over the tempting array of garments.

"There's the silk dress. What a dear girl!" cried Mrs. Aylmer. "Isn't it a perfectly splendid dress, Sukey? We must get it cut down, of course; and the extra breadths will do to renovate it when it gets a little shabby. I shall give a tea-party, I really will, Sukey, when this dress is made as good as new. I am quite certain that I can spare you my old black silk, which you know, Sukey, has been turned four times."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Sukey, in her downright voice. "And what news is there from Miss Florence, please, ma'am?"

"Oh, there is a letter. I have just had time to read it. It is a very nice, pleasant letter; but really Florence is the sort of girl who does not know where her bread is buttered. If she had been anybody else she would have made up to that young man instead of sending him away when I invited him in to supper. Florence is a great trial to me in many ways, Sukey."

"If I was you, ma'am, I'd be thankful to have such a good, nice, downright young lady like Miss Florence, that I would," said Sukey. "But don't keep me any longer now, please, ma'am. I'll go and make you a cup of cocoa: it's quite as much as you want for your dinner to-day. You're so new-fangled with your bits of clothes." [Pg 84]

"That I am," said Mrs. Aylmer the less, as Sukey hurried out of the room.

Amongst the clothes, lying by itself, was a thick envelope. Mrs. Aylmer tore it open. There tumbled out of it two golden sovereigns.

"Dear, dear!" thought the widow; "my sister-in-law Susan must be changing her mind to send me all these lovely clothes and this money; but stay: the writing is not in Susan's hand—it is doubtless the hand of that charming young creature, Miss Keys."

Bertha's letter ran as follows:—

"Dear Mrs. Aylmer—

"I have collected a few things which I think may prove useful, in especial the silk dress which you seemed so much to covet. I also send two sovereigns, as I think you will like to have the funds to pay the dressmaker for cutting it down to your figure. Please use the sovereigns in any way you think best.

"I have a little request to make of you, dear Mrs. Aylmer. I am not likely to come to Dawlish again, but I am much interested in your dear daughter Florence, and would be greatly obliged if you would favor me with her address in London. Will you send it to me by return of post, and will you put it into the addressed envelope which I enclose, as I do not want my benefactress Mrs. Aylmer to know anything

about this matter? If I can help you at any time pray command me.

"Yours sincerely,

"Bertha Keys."

Mrs. Aylmer was so excited by this letter, and by the fact that she possessed two sovereigns more money than she had done when she awoke that morning, that she could scarcely drink the cocoa when Sukey appeared with it. [Pg 85]

"Sukey," she exclaimed to that worthy woman, "it never rains but it pours. We *will* have a tea-party: such a tea-party it shall be; done in style, I can assure you. All the neighbours who have ever shown any kindness to me shall be invited, and we will have the most recherché little set-out. I will go to Crook's, in the High Street, and order the cakes and the pastry and the sandwiches, and we will hire enough cups and saucers and tea-spoons and all the other things which will be necessary."

"You had better begin by hiring an increased apartment, ma'am," said Sukey, in a dubious voice. "I don't say nothing against this parlour, but it ain't to say large. How will you crowd in all the visitors?"

"It is fashionable to have a crowded room," said Mrs. Aylmer, pausing for a moment to consider this difficulty. "People can stand and sit on the stairs; they always do in crushes. This is to be a crush and—"

"How will you pay for it, ma'am?"

"I tell you I have money. What do you say to these?"

As Mrs. Aylmer spoke, she held a sovereign between the finger and thumb of each hand.

Sukey opened her eyes.

"Is it your sister-in-law, ma'am," she said, "that is changing her mind?"

"No, it is not; I wish it were. I can tell you no more, you curious old body; but when both our silk dresses are made to fit us we will have the party." [Pg 86]

Sukey went softly out of the room.

"There's something brewing that I don't quite like," she said to herself. "I wish Miss Florence was at home! I wish the missus hadn't those queer mean ways! But there, when all's said and done, I have learned to be fond of her: only she's a very queer sort."

That evening Mrs. Aylmer wrote to Bertha Keys thanking her effusively for the parcel, telling her that she felt that she owed her lovely silk dress to her, and further thanking her for the sovereigns. The letter ran as follows:—

"I am not proud, my dear; and a little extra money comes in extremely handy. I mean to give a party and to show my neighbours that I am as good as any of them. It will be a return for many little kindnesses on their part, and will ensure me a comfortable winter. I shall have so many invitations to tea when they see me in that silk dress, and eat the excellent cakes, muffins, and crumpets, etc., which I shall provide for them, that they won't dare to cut me in the future.

"If you want dear Florence's address, here it is—12, Prince's Mansions, Westminster. She has taken a room in a sort of common lodging-house, and I understand from the way she has written to me that she is in one of the attics. It seems a sad pity that the dear child should pinch herself as she does, and if you, Miss Keys, could add to your other virtues that of effecting a reconciliation between Florence and her aunt by marriage, you would indeed fill my cup of gratitude to the brim.

"Yours sincerely,

"Mabel Aylmer."

"P.S.—If by any chance that most charming young man, Mr. Maurice Trevor, should be coming to Dawlish, I shall always be pleased to give him a welcome. You might mention to him where Florence is staying in London. He seemed to have taken quite a fancy to her, but mum's the word, my dear. Mothers will have dreams, you know." [Pg 87]

CHAPTER XIII. [Pg 88]

A WEARY WAIT.

Florence settled down in her attic, and made herself as comfortable as circumstances would permit.

With all her faults, and she had plenty, Florence had a straightforward sort of nature. She was alive to temptation, and when occasion rose, as has been already seen, could and did yield to it. But just now she was most anxious to eat the bread of independence, not to sink under the sway of Bertha Keys, to fight her own battle, and to receive her own well-earned reward.

She made her little attic look as neat and cheery as she could; she was extremely saving with regard to her food, and set to work at once trying to obtain employment.

Now, Florence honestly hated the idea of teaching. She was a fairly clever girl, but no more. She had certain aptitudes and certain talents, but they did not lie in the teacher's direction. For instance, she was no musician, and her knowledge of foreign languages was extremely small; she could read French fairly well, but could not speak it; she had only a smattering of German, and was not an artist. Her special forte was English history and literature, and she also had a fair idea of some of the sciences.

With only these weapons in hand, and the sum of twenty pounds in her pocket, she was about to fight the world. [Pg 89]

She herself knew well, none better, that her weapons were small and her chance of success not particularly brilliant.

With a good heart, however, she started out from her lodging on the morning after her arrival in town.

She went to a registry-office in the Strand and entered her name there. From this office she went to two or three in the West End, and, having put down her name in each office and answered the questions of the clerk who took her subscription, returned home.

She had been assured in four different quarters that it was only a matter of time; that as soon as ever the schools began she would get employment.

"There is no difficulty," one and all said to her. "You want to get a teacher's post; you are quite sure to succeed. There will be plenty of people requiring assistance of all sorts at the schools when the holidays are over."

"What shall I do in the meantime?" said Florence, who knew that several weeks of the holidays had yet to run.

"In the meantime," said all these people, "there is nothing to do but wait."

Florence wondered if she had really left her mother too soon.

"It would have been cheaper to stay on with the little Mummy," she said to herself; "but, under the circumstances, I could not stay. I dared not leave myself in Bertha's power. August is nearly through, and the schools will open again about the 20th of September. By then I shall surely hear of something. Oh, it is hateful to teach; but there is no help for it." [Pg 90]

Accordingly Florence returned home in as fair spirits as was to be expected.

She wrote and told her mother what she had done, and resolved to spend her time studying at the British Museum.

There were not many people yet in London, and she felt strange and lonely. A great longing for her old school life visited her. She wondered where her schoolfellows had gone, and what they were doing, and if they were also as hard pressed as she was.

Her money seemed to her to be already melting away in a remarkably rapid manner. She wanted new boots and a neat new serge dress, and thought she might as well get these necessary articles of apparel now, while she was waiting for a situation, as later; but, although she bought boots at the very cheapest place she could find, her funds melted still further, and before September was half through she had spent between five and six pounds of her small stock of money.

"This will never do," she said to herself; "I shall get so frightened that I shall become nervous. What am I to do? How am I to eke out the money till I get a post as teacher?"

It was already time for different mistresses at schools to be applying to her for her valuable services; but, although she listened with a beating heart as she heard the postman run up the stairs and deposit letters in the different hall doors of the various flats, very seldom indeed did the good man come up as far as her attic, and then it was a letter from her mother.

She decided to go again to the offices where she had entered her name, and enquire if there were any post likely to suit her which she could apply for. She was now received in a totally different spirit. [Pg 91]

"It is extremely unlikely, miss," said one and all of the clerks who had been so specious on the occasion of her first visit, "that we can get you anything to do. You are not a governess, you know, in the ordinary sense. You cannot teach music, nor languages, nor drawing. What can you expect, madam?"

"But you told me," began poor Florence, "you told me when I paid my fee on the previous occasion of calling that you could get me a post without the slightest difficulty."

"We will do our utmost, of course, madam; but, with your want of experience, we can make no definite promise. We certainly made none in the past," and the clerk whom Florence was interrogating gave her a severe glance, which was meant as a dismissal.

"If you cannot get me anything to do as a teacher, is there nothing else you can think of to suit me? Secretaries are sometimes employed, are they not?"

"Secretaryships are not in our line," said the clerk; "at least, not for ladies. People prefer men for the post—clever men who understand shorthand. You, of course, know nothing of that accomplishment?"

"Certainly not! Girls never learn shorthand," said Florence.

She left one office after the other, feeling sadder and sadder.

"What is to be done?" she said to herself, almost in tones of despair.

CHAPTER XIV.

[Pg 92]

A BLUNT QUESTION.

Florence was returning slowly home by way of Trafalgar Square when she heard a voice in her ear. She turned quickly, and was much astonished to see the bright face and keen blue eyes of Maurice Trevor.

"I thought it must be you," exclaimed the young man. "I am glad to see you. You passed me in a hurry just now, and never noticed me, so I took the liberty of following you. How do you do? I didn't know you were in town."

"I have been in town for over a fortnight," replied Florence. She found herself colouring, then turning pale.

"Is anything the matter? You don't look well."

"I am tired, that is all."

"May I walk part of the way home with you? It is nice to meet an old friend."

"Just as you please," replied Florence.

"Where do you live?"

"I am in a house in Westminster—12, Prince's Mansion, it is called. It is a curious sort of place, and let out in rooms to girls like myself. There is a restaurant downstairs. It is a nice, convenient place, and it is not dear. I think myself very lucky to have a room there."

[Pg 93]

"I suppose you are," assented Trevor, "but it sounds extraordinary. Do you like living alone in London?"

"I have no choice," replied Florence.

"I was sorry not to have seen you again before we left Dawlish. We had a good deal in common, had we not? That was a pleasant afternoon that we spent together looking at the sea-anemones."

"Very pleasant," she answered.

"And how is your mother, Miss Aylmer, and that nice young friend—I forget her name."

"Mother is quite well. I heard from her a few days ago; and Kitty Sharston is abroad."

"Kitty Sharston: that is a pretty name."

"And Kitty is so pretty herself," continued Florence, forgetting her anxieties, and beginning to talk in a natural way. "She is one of the nicest girls I have ever met. Her father has just returned from India, and he and she are enjoying a holiday together. But now, may I ask you some questions? Why are you not with Mrs. Aylmer and Bertha Keys?"

"I have not been at Aylmer's Court for some days. My mother has not been quite well, and I have been paying her a visit. But do tell me more about yourself. Are you going to live altogether in London?"

"I hope so."

"What a pity I didn't know it before! Mother would so like to know you, Miss Aylmer. I have told her something about you. Won't you come and see her some day? She would call on you, but she is quite an old lady, and perhaps you will not stand on ceremony."

"Of course not. I should be delighted to see your mother," said Florence, brightening up wonderfully. "I have been very lonely," she added.

[Pg 94]

"When I go home to-night I will tell mother that I have met you, and she will write to you. Will

you spend Sunday with us?"

"Shall you be at home?"

"Yes; I am not going back to Aylmer's Court until Tuesday. I will ask mother to invite you. I could meet you and bring you to Hampstead. We have a cottage in a terrace close to the heath; you will enjoy the air on Hampstead Heath. It is nearly as good as being in the country."

"I am sure it must be lovely. I am glad I met you," said poor Florence.

"You look better now," he answered, "but please give me your address over again."

As Trevor spoke, he took a small, gold-mounted note-book from his pocket, and when Florence gave him the address he entered it in a neat hand.

"Thank you," he said, putting the note-book back into his waistcoat pocket. "You will be sure to receive your invitation. You look more rested now, but you still have quite a fagged look."

"How can you tell? How do you know?"

"I have often watched that sort of look on people's faces. I take a great interest in—oh! so many things, that I could talk to you about if we had time. I am very sorry for Londoners. I should not care to live in London all my life."

"Nor should I; but, all the same, I expect I shall have to. Perhaps I ought to tell you, Mr. Trevor, quite frankly that I am a very poor girl, and have to earn my own living—that is why I am staying [Pg 95] in a place like Prince's Mansions. I have an attic in No. 12, a tiny room up in the roof, and I am looking out for employment."

"What sort of employment? What do you want to do?" asked Trevor.

"I suppose I shall have to teach, but I should like to be a secretary."

"A secretary—that is rather a wide remark. What sort of secretary?"

"Oh, I don't know; but anything is better than teaching. It is just because a secretaryship sounds vague that I think I should like it."

Trevor was thinking to himself. After a moment he spoke.

"Do you mind my asking you a very blunt question?"

Florence gave him a puzzled glance.

"What sort of a question? What do you mean?"

"Are you not Mrs. Aylmer's niece?"

"Your Mrs. Aylmer's niece?"

"Yes."

"I am her niece by marriage. Her husband was my father's brother."

"I understand; but how is it she never asks you to Aylmer's Court nor takes any notice of you?"

"I am afraid I cannot tell you."

"Cannot? Does that mean that you will not?"

"I will not, then."

Trevor flushed slightly. They had now nearly reached Westminster. [Pg 96]

"Here is a tea-shop," he said; "will you come in and have tea with me?"

Florence hesitated.

"Thank you. I may as well," she said then slowly.

They entered a pretty shop with little round tables covered with white cloths. That sort of shop was a novelty at that time.

Trevor and Florence secured a table to themselves. Florence was very hungry, but she restrained her appetite, fearing that he would notice. She longed to ask for another bun and a pat of butter.

"Oh, dear," she was saying to herself, as she drank her tea and ate her thin bread-and-butter, "I could demolish half the things in the shop. It is perfectly dreadful, and this tea must take the place of another meal. I must take the benefit of his hospitality."

A few moments later Trevor had bidden her good-bye.

"My mother will be sure to write to you," he said.

She would not let him walk with her as far as her lodgings, but shook hands with him with some pleasure in her face.

"I am so glad I met you," she repeated, and he echoed the sentiment.

As soon as he got home that day he went straight to his mother.

"You are better, are you not?" he said to her.

Mrs. Trevor was a middle-aged woman, who was more or less of an invalid. She was devoted to her son Maurice, and, although she delighted in feeling that he was provided for for life owing to Mrs. Aylmer's generosity, she missed him morning, noon, and night. [Pg 97]

"Ah, darling, it is good to see you back again," she said; "but you look hot and tired. What a long time you have been in town!"

"I have had quite an adventure," he said. "Mother, I want to know if you will do something for me."

"You have but to ask, Maurice."

"There is a girl"—he hesitated, and a very slight accession of colour came into his bronzed cheeks, "there is a girl I have taken rather a fancy to. Oh, no, I am not the least bit in love with her, so don't imagine it, little mother; but I pity her, and like her also exceedingly. I met her down at Dawlish. I want to know if you will be good to her. I came across her to-day whilst walking in town, and she was looking, oh! so fagged out and tired! I said you would write and invite her to come and see us here, and I promised that you would ask her to spend next Sunday with us."

"Oh, my dear Maurice, your last Sunday with me, God only knows for how long!"

"But you don't mind, do you, mother?"

She looked at him very earnestly. She was a wise woman in her way.

"No, I don't mind," she said; "I will ask her, of course."

"Then that is all right. Her name is Miss Florence Aylmer, and this is her address."

"Aylmer! How strange!"

"It is all very strange, mother. I cannot understand it, and it troubles me a good deal. She is Florence Aylmer, and she is my Mrs. Aylmer's niece by marriage."

"Very queer," said Mrs. Trevor; "I never thought Mrs. Aylmer had any relations. What sort of girl did you say she was?" [Pg 98]

"Not exactly handsome, but with a taking face and a good deal of pluck about her—and oh, mother, I believe she is starvingly poor, and she has to earn her own living, I made her have a cup to tea and some bread-and-butter to-night, and she ate as if she were famished. It's awfully distressing. I really don't know what ought to be done."

CHAPTER XV. [Pg 99]

EDITH FRANKS.

When Florence reached home she sat down for a long time in her attic, and did not move. She was thoroughly tired, and the slight meal she had taken at the restaurant had by no means satisfied her appetite. After about half an hour of anxious thought, during which she looked far older than her years, she took off her hat, and, going to her tiny chest of drawers, unlocked one of them and took her purse out. She carefully counted its contents. There were twelve unbroken sovereigns in the purse, and about two pounds' worth of silver—nearly fourteen pounds in all.

"How fast it is going!" thought the girl. "At this rate it will not see me through the winter, and, if those terrible people at the different registry-offices are right, I may not get any work during the whole winter. What shall I do? I will not go back to the little Mummy, to live upon her and prove myself a failure. I shall not ask anybody to help me. I must, I will fight my battle alone. Oh, this hunger! What would I not give for a good dinner."

She took up one of the shillings, and looked at it longingly. With this in her hand, she could go down to the restaurant and have as much food as she required. Suddenly she made up her mind.

"I must eat well for once. I must get over this hunger. I cannot help myself," she said to herself. [Pg 100] "This meal must last me the greater part of the week; to-morrow and the next day and the next I must do with a bread-and-butter dinner; but there is Sunday to be thought of—Sunday with that nice Mr. Trevor, Sunday with the country air all around, and of course plenty to eat. If I can have a good dinner to-night, I can go without another at least till Sunday."

So, hastily putting back the rest of her money, and locking her drawer, she went downstairs to the restaurant. She went to a table where she had sat before, and ordered her meal. She looked at the *menu* and ordered her dinner with extreme care. She could have anything she fancied on the *menu* for a shilling. A good many girls had really excellent and nourishing meals for sixpence, but Florence was so hungry she determined to be, as she expressed it, greedy for once. So she made her selection, and then sat back to wait as best she could for the first of the dishes to

arrive.

A girl with a rosy face and bright dark eyes presently came and took the seat opposite to her. She was a stranger to Florence. The waitress came up and asked what the girl would like to have for dinner.

"Soup, please, and a chop afterwards," was the hasty reply.

The waitress went away, and the girl, taking a German book out of her bag, opened it and began to read eagerly. She did not notice Florence, who had no book, and was feeling in a very excited and fractious humour, becoming feverishly anxious for her dinner. Presently Florence dropped her napkin-ring, making a little clatter as she did so. The girl seated opposite started, stopped, and picked it up for her. [Pg 101]

"Thank you," said Florence.

There was something in her tone which caused the strange girl to drop her German book and look at her attentively.

"Are you very tired?" she said.

"Tired, yes, but it does not matter," answered Florence.

"It is the hot weather," said the girl; "it is horrid being in town now. I should not be, only—" She paused and looked full at Florence, then she said impulsively: "You will be somewhat surprised: I am going to be a doctor—a lady doctor. You are horrified, no doubt. Before ten years are out there will be women doctors in England: they are much wanted."

"But can you, do they allow you to study in the men's schools?"

"Do they?" said the girl; "of course they don't. I have to go to America to get my degree. I am working here, and shall go to New York early in the spring. Oh, I am very busy, and deeply interested. The whole thing is profoundly interesting, fearfully so. I am reading medical books, not only in English, but also in French and German. Do you mind if I go on reading until dinner arrives?"

"Of course not. Why should you stop your studies on my account?" said Florence.

The girl again favoured her with a keen glance, and then, to Florence's surprise, instead of continuing her reading, she immediately closed her book and looked full across at her companion. [Pg 102]

"Why don't you read?" said Florence, in a voice which was almost cross.

"Thank you; I have found other employment."

"Staring at me?"

"Well, yes; you interest me. You are *fearfully* neurotic and—and anæmic. You ought to take iron."

"Thank you," said Florence; "I don't want anything which would make me more hungry than I am at present. Iron is supposed to promote appetite, is it not?"

"Yes. Do you live in this house?"

"I do," answered Florence.

"I have taken a room on the third floor, No. 17. What is your number?"

"Oh, I aspire a good bit," said Florence, with the ghost of a smile; "the number of my room is 32."

"May I come and see you?"

"No, thank you."

"What a rude girl! You certainly are *fearfully* neurotic. Ah! here comes—no, it's not my dinner, it is yours."

The soup Florence had ordered was placed before her. How she wished this bright-eyed girl, with the rude manner, as she considered, would resume her German.

"Would you like me to go on reading?" said the girl.

"You can please yourself, of course," answered Florence.

"I won't look at you, if that is what you mean; but I do wish, if I may not come to see you, that you will come to see me. There are so few girls at present in the house, and those who are there ought to make friends, ought they not? See: this is my card—Edith Franks."

"And you really mean to be a doctor—a doctor?" said Florence, not glancing at the card which her companion pushed towards her. [Pg 103]

"It is the dearest dream of my life. I want to follow in the steps of Mrs. Garrett Anderson; is she not noble? I thought you would be pleased."

"I don't know that I am; it does not sound feminine," replied Florence. She was devouring her

soup, and hating Edith Franks for staring at her.

Presently Edith's own dinner arrived, and she began to eat. She ate in a leisurely fashion, sipping her soup, and breaking her bread into small portions. She was not very hungry; in fact, she was scarcely hungry at all.

As Florence's own quite large meal proceeded, she began to consider herself the greediest of the greedy.

Miss Franks sat on and chatted. She talked very well, and she had plenty of tact, and soon Florence began to consider her rather agreeable than the reverse. Florence had ordered five distinct dishes for her dinner, and she ate each dish right through. Miss Franks was now even afraid to glance in her direction.

"There is no doubt the poor soul was starving," she said to herself.

At last Florence's meal was over. The two girls left the table together.

"Come to my room, won't you, to-night? It is not seven o'clock yet. I always have cocoa between nine and ten. Come and have a cup of cocoa with me, will you not?"

"Thank you," said Florence; "you are very good. My name is Florence Aylmer."

"And you are studying? What are you doing?" [Pg 104]

"I am not studying."

"Aren't you? Then—"

"You are full of curiosity, and you want to know why I am here," said Florence. "I am here because I want to earn my bread. I hope to get a situation soon. I am a girl out of a situation—you know the kind." She gave a laugh, and ran up the winding stairs to her own attic at the top of the house, without glancing back at Edith Franks.

"Shy, poor, and half-starved," said the medical student to herself; "I thought my work would come to me if I waited long enough. I must look after her a little bit."

Meanwhile, the very first thing Florence found when she entered her room was a letter, or, rather, a packet, lying on her table. She pounced upon it, as the hungry pounce on food. Her appetite was thoroughly satisfied at last, and her mind was just in the humour to require some diversion. She thought that she would rather like having cocoa presently with Miss Franks.

"She shall not patronise me; of that I am resolved," thought the proud girl. But here was a letter—a thick, thick letter. She flung herself into the first chair and tore it open. She glanced, a puzzled expression on her face, at pages of closely-written matter, and then picked up a single sheet, which had fallen from the packet. The letter was from Bertha Keys, and ran as follows:—

"My Dear, Good, Brave Flo—

"I have obtained your address, no matter how, no matter why, and I write to you. How are you getting on? You did a daring thing when you returned you know what; but, my dear, I respect you all the more for endeavouring to be independent. I think, however, it is quite possible that you may have considered my other suggestion. [Pg 105]

"Now, Flo, I should like to see myself in print—not myself as I am, but my words, the ideas which come through my brain. I long to see them before the world, to hear remarks upon them. Will you, dear Flo, read the tale which I enclose, and if you think it any good at all take it to a publisher and see if he will use it? You had better find an editor of a magazine, and offer it to him. It is not more than four thousand words in length, and it is, I think, exciting; and will you put your name to it and publish it as your own? I don't want the world to know Bertha Keys writes stories, but I should like the world to know the thoughts which come into her head, and if we make a compact between us there can be nothing wrong in it, and—but I will add no more. Do, do, dear Flo, make use of this story. I do not require any money for it. Make what use of it you can, and let me know if I am to send you further MSS.

"Your aunt, Mrs. Aylmer, is a little more snappish than usual. I have a hard time, I assure you, with her. My great friend, Maurice Trevor, returns, I think, in a day or two. Ah, Florence, you little know what a great, great friend he is!

"Yours affectionately,

"Bertha Keys."

CHAPTER XVI. [Pg 106]

ON THE BRINK OF AN ABYSS.

Florence sat for a long time with the manuscript of Bertha's story on her lap. Having read the letter once, she did not trouble herself to read it again. It was the sort of letter Bertha always wrote—the letter which meant temptation, the letter which seemed to drag its victim to the edge of an abyss.

Florence said to herself: "Shall I read the manuscript or shall I not? Shall I put it into the fire or shall I waste a couple of pence in returning it to Bertha, or shall I—"

She did not finish even in her own mind the last suggestion which formed itself in her brain. She had not read the title of the manuscript, but her thoughts kept wandering round and round it to the exclusion of everything else. Presently she took it in her hand, and felt its weight, and then she turned the pages one by one, and glanced at them for a moment, and saw that they were all written out very neatly, in a sort of copper-plate writing which was not the least like Bertha's. Bertha had a bold, dashing sort of hand, but this hand might be the work of anyone—the ordinary clerk used such a handwriting. The words were very easily read. Florence caught herself imbibing the meaning of a whole sentence; then, with a sudden, quick movement, she dashed the manuscript away from her to the other side of the room, and walked over and stood by the open [Pg 107] window looking across London. She had a headache, brought on through intense excitement, and the view, for the greater part concealed by the interminable London houses, scarcely appealed to her.

"It all looks worldly and sordid," thought the girl to herself. "I suppose it is very nice that I should have this peep across those chimney-tops, and should see those tops of houses, tier upon tier, far away as the skyline, but I am sick of them. They all look sordid. They all look cruel. London is a place to crush a girl; but I—I *won't* be crushed."

She paced up and down her room. There was not the slightest doubt that Bertha's letter was the one subject of her thoughts. Suddenly she came to a resolution.

"I know what I'll do," she said to herself; "I won't read that manuscript, but I'll get Miss Edith Franks to read it. I won't tell her who has written it; she can draw her own conclusions. I'll get her to read it aloud to me, and perhaps she will tell me what it is worth. I hope, I do hope to God that it is worth nothing—that it is poor and badly written, and that she will advise the author to put it into the fire, and not to waste her time offering it to a publisher. She shall be the judge of its merits; but I won't decide yet whether I shall use it or not—only she shall tell me whether it is worth using. I am sure it won't be worth using. Bertha wrote a clever essay long ago, but she does not write much, and she must be out of practice; and why should she be so clever and able to do everything so well? But Miss Franks shall decide. She looks as if she could give one a very downright honest opinion, and she is literary and cultivated, and would know if the thing is worth [Pg 108] anything. Yes, it is a comfort to come to some decision."

So Florence washed her face and hands, made her hair tidy, and put on a fresh white linen collar, and soon after nine o'clock, with the manuscript in her hand, she ran downstairs, and presently knocked at the door of No. 17. The brisk voice of Miss Franks said: "Come in!" and Florence entered.

"That is right," said Edith Franks; "I am right glad to see you. What do you think of my diggings—nice, eh?"

"Oh, you are comfortable here," said Florence, with the ghost of a sigh, for truly the room, as compared with her own, looked absolutely luxurious. There was a comfortable sofa, which Miss Franks told her afterwards she had contrived out of a number of old packing-cases, and there was a deep straw armchair lined with chintz and abundantly cushioned, and on a table pushed against the wall and on the mantelpiece were jars full of lovely flowers—roses, verbena, sweetbriar, and quantities of pinks. The room was fragrant with these flowers, and Florence gave a great sigh as she smelt them.

"Oh, how sweet!" she said.

"Yes; I put this verbena on the little round table near the sofa; you are to lie on the sofa. Come: put up your feet this minute."

"But I really don't want to," said Florence, protesting, and beginning to laugh.

"But I want you to. You can do as you please in the restaurant, and you can do as you please in your own diggings, but in mine you are to do as I wish. Now then, up go your feet. I am making [Pg 109] the most delicious cocoa by a new recipe. I bought a spirit-lamp this morning. You cannot think how clever I am over all sorts of cooking."

"But what are those things on that table?" said Florence.

"Oh, some of my medical tools. I do a tiny bit of dissecting now and then—nothing very dreadful. I have nothing to-night of the least importance, so you need not shudder. I want to devote myself to you."

Florence could not but own that it was nice to be waited on. The sofa made out of packing-cases was extremely soft and comfortable. Miss Franks put pillows for her guest's comfort and laid a light couvre-pied over her feet.

"Now then," she said, "a little gentle breeze is coming in at the window, and the roses and pinks and mignonette will smell more sweetly still as the night advances. I will not light the lamp yet, for there is splendid moonlight, and it is such a witching hour. I can make the cocoa beautifully by moonlight. It will be quite romantic to do so, and then afterwards I will show you my charming reading-lamp. I have a lamp with a green shade lined with white, the best possible thing for the eyes. I will make you a shade when I have time. Now then, watch me make the cocoa, or, if you prefer it, look out of the window and let the moon soothe your ruffled feelings."

"You are very kind, and I don't know how to thank you," said Florence; "but how can you possibly tell that I have ruffled feelings?" [Pg 110]

"See them in your brow, my dear: observe them in your face. I am not a medical student for nothing. I tell you you are anæmic and neurotic; indeed, your nerves have reached a rare state of irritability. At the present moment you are in quite a crux, and do not know what to do. Oh, I am a witch—I am quite a witch; I can read people through and through; but I like you, my dear. You are vastly more interesting to me because you are in a crux, and neurotic and anæmic. Now then, look at your dear lady moon, and let me make the cocoa in peace."

"What an extraordinary girl!" thought Florence to herself; "but I suppose I like her. She is so fearfully downright, I feel almost afraid of her."

Miss Franks darted here and there, busy with her cooking. After a time, with a little sigh of excitement, Florence saw her put the extinguisher on the spirit-lamp. She then hastily lit the lamp with the green shade, and, placing it on the table where the verbena and the sweetbriar and mignonette gave forth such intoxicating odours, she laid a cup of steaming frothy cocoa by Florence's side, and a plate of biscuits not far off.

"Now then, eat, drink, and be thankful," said Miss Franks. "I love cocoa at this hour. Yours is made entirely of milk, so it will be vastly nourishing. I am going to enjoy my cup also."

She flung herself into the straw chair lined with cushions, and took her own supper daintily and slowly. While she ate, her bright eyes kept darting about the room noting everything, and from time to time fastening themselves with the keenest penetration on Florence's flushed face. [Pg 111]

Florence felt that never in the whole course of her life had she enjoyed anything more than that cup of cocoa.

When the meal was finished Miss Franks jumped up and began to wash the cups and saucers.

"You must let me help you," said Florence. She sprang very determinedly to her feet. "I have done these things over and over for mother at home," she said, "and I really must wash my own cup and saucer."

"You shall wipe, and I will wash," said Miss Franks. "I don't at all mind being helped. Division of labour lightens toil, does it not? There, take that tea-towel; it is a beauty, is it not? It is Russian."

It was embroidered at each edge with wonderful stitches in red, and was also trimmed with heavy lace.

"I have a sister in Russia, and she sent me a lot of these things when I told her I meant to take up housekeeping," said Miss Franks. "Now that we have washed up and put everything into apple-pie order, what about that manuscript?"

"What manuscript?" said Florence, starting and colouring.

"The one you brought into the room. You don't suppose I didn't see? You have hidden it just under that pillow on the sofa. Lie down once more on your place of repose, and let me run my eye over it."

"Would you?" said Florence. She coloured very deeply. "Would you greatly mind reading it aloud?"

"You have written it, I presume?" said Miss Franks.

Florence did not say anything. She shut up her mouth into rather a hard line. Edith Franks nodded twice to herself; then, putting on her pincenez, she proceeded to read the manuscript. She had a perfectly well-trained voice without a great amount of expression in it. She read on at first slowly and smoothly. At the end of the first page she paused for a moment, and looked full up at her companion. [Pg 112]

"How well you have been taught English!" she said.

Still Florence did not utter a word.

At the end of the second page Miss Franks again made a remark.

"Your writing is so good that I have never to pause to find out the meaning of a word, and you have a very pure Saxon style."

"Oh, I wish you would go on, and make your comments at the end," said Florence then, in an almost cross tone.

"My dear, that answer of yours requires medicine. I shall certainly insist upon your taking a tonic

to your room with you. I can dispense a little already, and have some directions by me. I can make up something which will do you a lot of good."

"Do go on reading," said Florence.

Edith Franks proceeded with the manuscript. Her even voice still flowed on without pause or interruption. At the end of the third or fourth page, however, she ceased to make any remarks: she turned the pages now rapidly, and about the middle of the story her voice changed its tone. It was no longer even nor smooth: it became broken as though something oppressed her, then it rose triumphant and excited. She had finished: she flung the manuscript back almost at [Pg 113] Florence's head with a gay laugh.

"And you pretend, you pretend," she said, "that you are a starving girl—a girl out of a situation! You are a sham, Miss Aylmer—you are a sham."

"What do you mean?" said Florence.

"Why, this," said Edith Franks. She took up the manuscript again.

"What about it? I mean, do you—do you—like it?"

"Like it? It is not that exactly. I admire it, of course. Have you written much? Have you ever published anything?"

"Never a line."

"But you must have written a great deal to have achieved that style."

"No, I have written very little."

"Then you are a heaven-born genius: give me your hand."

Florence slowly and unwilling extended her hand. Miss Franks grasped it in both of hers.

"Flexible fingers," she said, "but not exactly, not precisely the hand of an artist, and yet, and yet you are an artist through and through. My dear, you are a genius."

"I do not know why you say that."

"Because you have written that story, that queer, weird, extraordinary tale. It is not the plot alone: it is the way you have told it, the way the figures group themselves together, the strength that is in them, the way you have grasped the situation; and you have made all those characters live. They move backwards and forwards; they are human beings. I am so glad Johanna won the [Pg 114] victory, she was so brave, and it was such a cruel temptation. Oh, I shall dream of that story, and yet you say you have written very little."

"You jump to conclusions," said Florence. She spoke in a queer voice. "I never told you that I had written that story."

"But you have, my dear; I see it in your face. Oh, I congratulate you."

"Would it be possible to—to publish it?" was Florence's next remark, made after a long pause.

"Publish it? I know half a dozen editors in London who would jump at it. I know a good deal about writing, as it happens. My brother is a journalist, and he has talked to me about these things. He is a very clever journalist, and at one time I had a faint sort of dream that I might follow in his steps, but my own career is better—I mean for me. Publish it; of course, you shall publish it. Editors are only too thankful to get the real stuff, but, poor souls! they seldom do get it. You will be paid well for this. Of course, you will make up your mind to be an author, a writer of short stories, a second Bret Harte. Oh, this is splendid, superb!"

Florence got up from her sofa; she felt a little giddy. Her face was very white.

"Do you—do you know any publishers personally?" was her next remark.

"Not personally, but I can give you a list of half a dozen at least. I shall watch your career with intense interest, and I can advise you too. I tell you what it is—on Sunday I will go and see my brother Tom, and I will tell him about you, and ask him what he would recommend. You must not [Pg 115] give yourself away; you have a great career before you. Of course, you will lead the life of a writer, and nothing else?"

"Good night," said Florence; "I am very tired, but I am awfully obliged to you."

"Won't you wait until I make up your tonic?"

"I could not take it to-night. I have a bad headache; I want to go to bed. Thank you so very much."

"But, I say, you are leaving your darling, precious manuscript behind you." Miss Franks darted after Florence, and thrust the manuscript into her hand.

"Take care of it," she said; "it is the work of a genius. Now, good night."

Florence went upstairs. Slowly she entered her dismal little attic. She lit a candle, and locked her door. She laid the manuscript on the chest of drawers. She went some steps away from it as though she were afraid of it; then with a hasty movement she unlocked the drawer where she

kept her purse, and thrust the manuscript in. She locked the drawer again, and put the key into her writing-desk, and then she undressed as fast as ever she could, and got into bed, and covered her head so that she should not see the moon shining into her room, and said under her breath: "O God, let me sleep as soon as possible, for I cannot, I dare not think."

CHAPTER XVII.

[Pg 116]

NEARER AND NEARER.

Florence had lived without letters for some time, but now they seemed to pour in. The next morning, as she was preparing her extremely frugal breakfast, consisting of bread without butter and a little weak tea, she heard the postman climbing all the way up to her attic floor. His double knock sounded on her door, and a letter was dropped in. She took it up: it was from her mother. She opened it languidly. Mrs. Aylmer wrote in some distress:—

"My Darling Child—

"The queerest thing has happened. I cannot possibly account for it. I have been robbed of five pounds. I was on the sands yesterday talking to a very pleasant jolly fat little man, who interested me by telling me that he knew London, and that he considered I had done extremely wrong in allowing you to go there without a chaperon. He described the dangers to which young girls were subjected in such terrible and fearful language that I very nearly screamed.

"I thanked him for his advice, and told him that I would write to you immediately and ask you to come home. My darling, it would be better for us both to starve at home than for you to run the risks which he has hinted at.

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"But to come to the real object of this letter. I am five pounds short, my dear Florry—I had five pounds in my pocket, two of which I had received unexpectedly, and three from my very, very tiny income. Sukey and I were going to have quite a little turn-out—a nice tea-party; but fortunately, most fortunately, Providence prevented my ordering the buns and cakes, or sending out the invitations, and when I came in my money was gone. Of course it was not the little man, so do not point your suspicions at him. Somebody robbed the widow. Oh, what a judgment will yet fall upon that head!

"Dear Flo, I know you have something by you—how large a sum you have never confided to your poor mother. Will you lend me five pounds, darling, and send it at once? Quarter-day is coming on, and I have several things to meet. Do not hesitate, my love: it shall be returned to you when I get my next allowance.

"I will write to you later on with regard to your coming back to Dawlish. In the meantime think of your poor mother's distress, and do your utmost for her."

Florence let the letter drop from her hands. She sat before her frugal board, and slowly and listlessly raised her cup of tea to her lips.

"I seem to be pushed gradually nearer and nearer the edge," she said to herself. "What possessed mother to lose that money? Of course the man was a thief. Mother is so silly, and she really gets worse as she grows older. Dear little Mummy, I love her with all my heart; but her want of common-sense does try me sometimes."

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The day was going to be a particularly hot one. There was a mist all over the horizon, and the breeze was moving languidly.

Florence had her window wide open, and was wondering how she could live through the day. To-day was Saturday. To-morrow she would have a pleasant time. She looked forward to meeting Maurice Trevor more than she dared to admit to herself. She wondered what sort of woman his mother was.

"At any rate," she said to herself, "he is nice. I like him, and I am sure he likes me, and we shall enjoy ourselves on Hampstead Heath. It won't be so hot there; it will be a little bit of the country. I must send mother the five pounds, and I suppose I need not decide about that awful manuscript till Monday."

These thoughts had scarcely come into her head before there came a knock at her door. Florence went to open it, and Edith Franks, very neatly dressed, and looking business-like and purposeful, with bright eyes and a clear colour in her cheeks, stood on the threshold.

"How do you do?" she said. "I am just off to my work. I am about to have a very hard day, but I thought I would refresh myself with a sight of you. May I come in?"

"Please do," said Florence, but she did not look altogether happy as she gave the invitation. Her bed was unmade, her dressing things were lying about, her breakfast was just the sort which she did not wish the keen-eyed medical student to see. There was no help for it, however. Edith

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Franks had come up for the purpose of spying into the nakedness of the land, and spy she did. She looked quickly round her in that darting, bird-like manner which characterised all her movements. She saw the untidy room, she noticed the humble, insufficient meal.

Edith Franks had the kindest heart in the world; but she was sometimes a little, just a very little destitute of tact.

"My dear," she said, "may I sit down? Your stairs really take one's breath away. I know now what I specially came for. Tom has promised to call for me this morning."

"Who is Tom?" asked Florence.

"Don't you know? What a short memory you have! I told you something about him last night—my clever journalist brother. He is on the staff of the *Daily Tidings*, and the new six-penny magazine that people talk so much about, the *Argonaut*. He has a splendid post, and has great influence. If you will entrust that precious manuscript to me, I will let Tom see it. He is the best of judges. If he says it is worth anything, your fortune is made. If, on the other hand—"

"Oh, but he won't like it, and I think I would rather not," said Florence. She turned very pale as she spoke. Edith gave her another glance.

"Let me have it," she said. "Tom's seeing it means nothing. I will get him to run his eye over it while we are at lunch together. Here, get it for me; there's a good girl."

Florence rose. Her feet seemed weighted with lead. She unlocked her drawer, took out the manuscript, and nearly flung it at Edith's head. She restrained herself, however, and stood with it in her hand looking as undecided as a girl could look. [Pg 120]

"You tempt me mightily," she said; "why do you tempt me?"

"To get money for what is such splendid work," said Miss Franks, with a gay laugh. "I am glad I tempt you, for you want money, you poor, proud, queer girl. I like you—I like you much, but you must just let me help you over this crisis. Give it to me, my dear."

She nearly snatched the manuscript from Florence, and thrust it into a small leather bag which she wore at her side.

"Tom shall tell you what he thinks of it, and now ta! ta!"

CHAPTER XVIII. [Pg 121]

A VESTIGE OF HOPE.

Miss Franks was heard tripping downstairs as fast as her feet could carry her, and Florence covered her face with her hands.

"I have yielded," she said to herself. "What is to be done?" She got up desperately.

"I must not think, that is evident," was her next sensation. She could not take any more breakfast. She was too tired, too stunned, too unnerved. She dressed herself slowly, and determined, after posting the necessary money to her mother, to go the round of the different registry-offices where she had entered her name.

"If there is any chance, any chance at all, I will tell Edith Franks the truth to-night," she said to herself. "If there is no chance of my earning money—why, this sum that mother has demanded of me means the reducing of my store to seven pounds and some odd silver—I shall be penniless before many weeks are over. What is to be done?"

Florence wrote a short letter to her mother. She made no allusions whatever to the little woman's comments with regard to the dangers in which she herself was placed.

"I am extremely likely to die of starvation, but there is no other danger in my living alone in London," she thought, with a short laugh. And then she went to a post-office and got the necessary postal orders, and put them into the letter, and registered it and sent it off. [Pg 122]

"Oh, Mummy, do be careful," she said, in the postscript; "it has been rather hard to spare you this, though, of course I do it with a heart and a half."

Afterwards poor Florence went the dreary round—from Harley-street to Bond-street, from Bond-street to Regent-street, from Regent-street to the Strand did she wander, and in each registry-office she received the same reply: "There is nothing at all likely to suit you."

At last, in a little office in Fleet-street, she was handed the address of a lady who kept a school, and who might be inclined to give Florence a small post.

"The lady came in late last night," said the young woman who spoke to her across a crowded counter, "and she said she wanted someone to come and live in the house and look after a lot of girls, and she would be glad to make arrangements, as term would begin in about a fortnight. You might look her up. I know the salary will be very small; but I think she is willing to give board

and lodging."

Slightly cheered by this vestige of hope, Florence mounted an omnibus, and presently found herself at South Kensington. She found the right street, and stopped before a door of somewhat humble dimensions. She rang the bell. A charwoman opened the door after some delay, told her that Mrs. Fleming was within, and asked her what her message was.

Florence said she had come after the post which Mrs. Fleming was offering. [Pg 123]

The charwoman looked dubious.

"I wouldn't if I was you," she said, in a low voice, hiding both her hands under her apron as she spoke.

Florence would not condescend to consult with the charwoman whether she was to accept the situation or not. She simply said: "Will you tell your mistress that I am here?"

"A wilful lass," muttered the old woman, "and I told her she had better not." She shambled across a dirty passage, and opened a door at the farther end. A moment later Florence found herself in the presence of a tall woman with a very much powdered face and untidy hair. This personage was dressed in rusty black, wore a dirty collar and cuffs, and had hands evidently long strangers to soap-and-water. She invited Florence to seat herself, and looked her all over.

"H'm! you've come after the situation. Your name, please."

"Florence Aylmer."

"Your age?"

"I am nearly twenty-one."

"Very young. Have you had experience in controlling the follies of youth?"

"I have been pupil teacher at my last school for over a year," said Florence.

"Ah, and where was your school?"

Florence mentioned it.

"Have you ever got into any scrape of any sort, been a naughty girl, or anything of that kind? I have to make most searching enquiries." [Pg 124]

"Why do you ask?" said Florence. She coloured first, and then turned very pale.

Mrs. Fleming gazed at her with hawk-like eyes.

"Why don't you answer?"

"Because I cannot see," replied Florence, with some spirit, "that you have any right to ask me the question. I can give you excellent testimonials from the mistress of the school where I was living."

"That will not do. I find that nothing so influences youth as that the instructress should give an epitome of her own life, should be able plainly to show how *she* has conquered temptation, and risen even above the *appearance* of evil. If there is a flaw in the governess, there will also be a flaw in the pupils—understand, eh?"

"Yes, madam," said Florence; "I am afraid your post won't suit me. I have certainly a great many flaws; I never supposed you wanted a perfect governess."

"Impertinent," said Mrs. Fleming. "Here am I ready to offer you the shelter of my roof, the excellent food which always prevails in this establishment, and fifteen pounds a year, and yet you talk in that lofty tone. You are a very silly young woman. I am quite sure you won't suit me."

"It is a foregone conclusion," said Florence, indulging in a little pertness as she saw that the situation would no more suit her than she it. She walked towards the door.

"I will wish you good morning," she said.

"Stay one moment. What can you teach?"

"Nothing that will suit you."

"I must certainly remove my name from that registry-office. I stipulated that I should see godly maidens of spotless character. You, who evidently have a shady past, dare to come to me to offer your polluted services! I will wish you good morning." [Pg 125]

"I have already wished you good morning," said Florence. She turned without another word, and, not deigning to ask the assistance of the charwoman, left the house.

When she got to the street she was trembling.

"It is hard for girls like me to earn their own bread," she said to herself. "What is to be done? Nearer and nearer am I getting to the edge of the cliff. What is to be done?"

She returned home, and spent the rest of the day in a state of intense depression. Her attic was

so suffocating that she could not stay in it, but there was a general sitting-room downstairs, and she went there and contrived to make herself as wretched as she could over a well-thumbed novel which another girl had left behind her on the previous evening.

A certain Miss Mitford, the head of this part of the establishment, wandered in, saw that Florence was quite alone, noticed how ill and wretched she looked, and sat down near her.

"Your name is, I think, Aylmer," said this good woman.

"Yes: Florence Aylmer," replied Florence, and she scarcely raised her eyes from her book.

"You don't look very well. I am going for a little drive: a friend of mine is lending me her carriage. I have plenty of room for you; will you come with me?" [Pg 126]

"Do you mean it?" said Florence, raising languid eyes.

"I certainly do. My friend has a most comfortable carriage. We will drive to Richmond Park. What do you say?"

"That I thank you very much, and I—"

"Of course you'll come."

"Yes, I'll come," said Florence. She ran upstairs more briskly than she had done yet. The thought of the drive, and the peace of being alone with a woman who knew absolutely nothing about her, was soothing. Miss Mitford was not remarkable for her penetration of character, but she was essentially kind.

The carriage arrived and she and Florence got in. They drove for a quarter of a mile without either of them uttering a word; then the coachman drew up at a shabby house. Miss Mitford got out, ran up the steps, and rang the bell; in a moment or two three little girls with very pasty faces and lack-lustre eyes appeared.

"I am sorry I was late, dears," said Miss Mitford; "but jump in: there is room for us all in the barouche."

Florence felt now almost happy. There was no chance of Miss Mitford discovering her secret. Indeed, the superintendent of No. 12, Prince's Mansions, had not the faintest idea of enquiring into Florence's affairs. She could bestow a passing kindness on a sad-looking girl, but it was not her habit to enquire further. She chatted to the children, and Florence joined in. Presently she found herself laughing.

When they reached the park, they all alighted and sat under the trees, and Miss Mitford produced a mysterious little basket, out of which she took milk and sponge-cakes, and Florence [Pg 127] enjoyed her feast just as much as the children did. It was seven o'clock when she arrived home again, and Edith Franks was waiting for her in the downstair hall.

CHAPTER XIX. [Pg 128]

IN THE BALANCE.

The moment Edith saw Florence, she went up to her, seized her by the arm, and said, in an imperious voice: "You must come with me to my room immediately."

"But why?" asked Miss Aylmer, trying to release herself from the firm grip in which Edith Franks held her.

"Because I have something most important to tell you."

Florence did not reply. She had been cheered and comforted by her drive, and she found that Edith Franks, with all her kindness, had a most irritating effect upon her. There was nothing for it, however, but to comply, and the two went upstairs as far as the third story together. There they entered Edith's sitting-room. She pushed Florence down on the sofa, and, still keeping a hand on each of her shoulders, said emphatically: "Tom: read it."

"What do you mean?" was Florence's almost inane answer.

"How stupid you are!" Edith gave her a little shake. "When I am excited—I to whom it means practically nothing, why should not you be? Tom read it, and he means to show it to his chief. You are made, and I have made you. Kiss me; let me congratulate you. You will starve no longer; you will have plenty. What is more, you will have fame. You will be courted by the great; you have an honourable future in front of you. Look up! Lose that lack-lustre expression in your eyes. Oh, [Pg 129] good gracious! the girl is ill." For Florence had turned ghastly white.

"This is a case for a doctor," said Edith Franks; "lie down—that is better." She pulled the cushions away from the sofa and pushed Florence into a recumbent position.

"I have some sal volatile here; you must drink it."

Edith rushed across the room, took the necessary bottle from her medical shelf, prepared a dose, and brought it to the half-fainting girl.

Florence sipped it slowly. The colour came back into her cheeks, and her eyes looked less dazed.

"Now you are more yourself. What was the matter with you?"

"But you—you have not given it; he—he has not shown it—"

"You really are most provoking," said Miss Franks. "I don't know why I take so much trouble for you—a stranger. I have given you what would have taken you months to secure for yourself: the most valuable introduction into the very best quarter for the disposal of your wares. Oh, you are a lucky girl. But there, you shall dine with me to-night."

"I cannot."

"Too proud, eh?"

"Oh, you don't know my position," said poor Florence.

"Nonsense! Go up to your room and have a rest. I will come for you in a quarter of an hour. I have ordered dinner for two already. If you don't eat it, it will be thrown away." [Pg 130]

"I am afraid it will have to be thrown away! I—I don't feel well."

"You are a goose; but if you are ill, you shall stay here and I will nurse you."

"No; I think I'll go upstairs. I want to be alone."

Florence staggered across the room as she spoke. Edith Franks looked at her for a moment in a puzzled way.

"I shall expect you down to dinner," she said. "Dinner will be ready in a quarter of an hour. Mind, I shall expect you."

Florence made no answer. She slowly left the room, closing the door after her, and retired to her own apartment.

Edith Franks clasped both her hands to her head.

"Well, really," she thought, "why should I put myself out about an ungrateful girl of that sort? But there, she is deeply interesting: one of those strange vagaries of genius. She is a psychological study, beyond doubt. I must see plenty of her. I have a great mind to take up psychology as my special branch of the profession; it is so deeply, so appallingly interesting. Poor girl, she has great genius! When that story is published all the world will know. I never saw Tom so excited about anything. He said: 'There is stuff in this.' He said it after he had read a page; he said it again when he had gone half-way through the manuscript; and he clapped his hands at the end and said: 'Bravo!' I know what that means from Tom. He is the most critical of men. He distrusts everything until it has proved itself good, and yet he accepted the talent of that story without a demur." [Pg 131]

Miss Franks hurriedly moved about the room, changed her dress, smoothed her hair, washed her hands, looked at her little gun-metal watch, saw that the quarter of an hour had expired, and tripped downstairs to the dining-room.

"Will she be there, or will she not?" thought Edith Franks to herself.

She looked eagerly into the great room with its small tables covered with white cloths. There were seats in the dining-room for one hundred and fifty people.

Edith Franks, however, looked over to a certain corner, and there, at one of the tables, quietly waiting for her, and also neatly dressed, sat Florence Aylmer.

"That is right," said Miss Franks; "you are coming to your senses."

"Yes," answered Florence, "I am coming to my senses."

There was a bright flush on each of her cheeks, and her eyes were brilliant: she looked almost handsome.

Edith gazed at her with admiration.

"So you are drinking in the delicious flattery: you are preparing for the fame which awaits you," said the medical student.

"I want to say one thing, Miss Franks," remarked Florence, bending forward.

"What is that?"

"When you came up this morning to my room I did not wish to give you the manuscript; you took it from me almost by force. You promised further that your brother's seeing it would mean nothing. You did not keep your word. Your brother has seen it, and, from what you tell me, he approves of it. From what you tell me further, he is going to show it in a certain quarter where its success will be more or less assured. Of course, you and he may be both mistaken, and after all the story which you think so highly of may be worth nothing; that remains to be proved." [Pg 132]

"It is worth a great deal; the world will talk about it," said Edith Franks.

"But I don't want the world to talk of it," said Florence. "I didn't wish to be pushed and hurried as I have been. I did wrong to consult you, and yet I know you meant to be kind. You have not been kind: you have been the reverse; but you have *meant* to be kind, and I thank you for your intention. Things must go their own way. I have been hard pressed and I have yielded; only please do not ask me to talk about it. When your brother receives news I shall be glad to know; but even then I want to hear the fate of the manuscript without comment from you. That is what I ask. If you will promise that, I will accept your dinner. I am very proud, and it pains me to accept charity from anyone; but I will accept your dinner and be grateful to you: only will you promise not to talk of the manuscript any more?"

"Certainly, my dear," answered Edith Franks. "Have a potato, won't you?"

As Edith helped Florence to a floury potato, she exclaimed, under her breath: "A little mad, poor girl: a most interesting psychological study."

CHAPTER XX.

[Pg 133]

ROSE VIEW.

It was a most glorious Sunday, and Florence felt cheered as she dressed for her visit to Hampstead. She resolved to put all disagreeable things out of sight.

"I fell before," she said to herself, "and I am falling again. I am afraid there is nothing good in me: there is certainly *nothing* stable in me. I yielded to temptation when I was a girl at school, and I am yielding now. I have put myself again into the power of an unscrupulous woman. But for to-day at least I will be happy; I will banish dull care."

So she made herself look as bright and pretty as she could in a white washing dress. She wore a smart sailor hat, and, putting on some white washing gloves, ran downstairs. On one of the landings she met Edith Franks.

"Whither away?" asked that young lady.

"I am going to Hampstead to spend the day with friends."

"That is very nice. I know Hampstead well. What part are you going to?"

"Close to the heath: to people of the name of Trevor."

"Not surely to Mrs. Trevor, of Rose View?" exclaimed Edith Franks, starting back a step and raising her brows as she spoke.

[Pg 134]

"Yes."

"And do you know her son, that most charming fellow, Maurice Trevor?"

"I know him slightly."

"Oh, but this is really delightful. We have been friends with the Trevors, Tom and I, ever since we were children. This seems to be quite a new turn to our friendship, does it not?"

Florence felt herself both cold and stiff. She longed to be friendly with Edith, who was, she was well aware, all that was kind; nevertheless, a strange sensation of depression and of coming trouble was over her.

"She is kind; but she may tempt me to do what is wrong," thought poor Florence.

"I don't know the Trevors well," she answered. "I have met Mr. Trevor once or twice, but I have never even seen his mother. His mother has been kind enough to ask me to spend to-day with her. I will say good-bye now."

"Be sure you give my love to dear Mrs. Trevor, and remember me to Maurice. Tell him, with my kind regards, that I commiserate him very much."

"Why so?" asked Florence.

"Because he has had the bad luck to be adopted by a rich, eccentric old lady, and he will lose all his personality. Tell him I wouldn't be in his shoes for anything, and now ta! ta! I see you are dying to be off."

Edith went back to her room, and Florence ran downstairs, entered an omnibus which would convey her the greater part of the way to Hampstead, and arrived there a little before ten o'clock. As she was walking up the little path to the Trevors' cottage, Maurice Trevor came down to meet her.

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"How do you do?" he said, shaking hands with her and taking her immediately into the house.

Mrs. Trevor was standing in the porch.

"This is Miss Aylmer, mother," said the young man.

Mrs. Trevor held out her hand, looked earnestly into Florence's face, then drew her towards her and kissed her.

"I am glad to see you, my dear," she said; "my son has told me about you. Welcome to Rose View; I hope you like the place."

Florence looked around her and gave an exclamation of surprise and delight. The house was a very small one, but it stood in a perfect bower of roses: they were climbing all over the house, and blooming in the garden: there were standard roses, yellow, white, and pink, moss-roses, the old-fashioned cabbage-rose, and Scotch roses, little white and red ones.

"I never saw anything like it," said Florence, forgetting herself in her astonishment and delight.

Mrs. Trevor watched her face.

"She is a nice girl, but she has some trouble behind," thought the widow to herself.

"We will go round the garden," she said; "it is not time for church yet. I am not able to go this morning, but Maurice will take you presently. You have just to cross the heath and you can go to a dear little church, quite in the depths of the country. I never need change of air here in my rose-bower. But come: what roses shall I pick for you?"

"I must give Miss Aylmer her flowers, as she is practically my guest," said Trevor, coming forward at that moment. He picked a moss-rose bud and a few Scotch roses, made them into a posy, and gave them to Florence. She placed the flowers in her belt; her cheeks were already bright with colour, and her eyes were dewy with happiness. She bent down several times to sniff the fragrance of the flowers. Mrs. Trevor drew her out to talk, and soon she was chatting and laughing, and looked like a girl who had not a care in the world. [Pg 136]

"I never saw anything so sweet," she said. "How have you managed to make all these roses bloom at once?"

"I study roses; they are my specialty. I think roses are the great joy of my life," said Mrs. Trevor. But as she spoke she glanced at her stalwart, handsome son, and Florence guessed that he was his mother's idol, and wondered how she could part with him to Mrs. Aylmer.

"The church bells are beginning to ring," he said suddenly; "would you like to go to church or would you rather just wander about the heath?"

"I think I would rather stay on the heath this morning," said Florence. She coloured as she spoke. "I do not feel very churchy," she added.

"All right: we'll have our service out of doors then; we'll be back, mother, in time for lunch."

CHAPTER XXI. [Pg 137]

AN AWKWARD POSITION.

Trevor raised the latch of the gate as he spoke, and Florence and he went out into what the girl afterwards called an enchanted world. Florence during that walk was light-hearted as a lark and forgot all her cares.

Trevor made himself a very agreeable companion. He had from the first felt a great sympathy for Florence. He was not at that time in love with her, but he did think her a specially attractive girl, and, believing that she was sorrowful, and also having a sort of latent feeling that he himself was doing her an injury by being Mrs. Aylmer's heir, he was more attentive to her and more sympathetic in his manner than he would otherwise have been.

They found a shady dell on the heath where they sat and talked of many things. It was not until it was nearly time to return home, and they saw the people coming away from the little church down in the vale, that Trevor looked at his companion and said abruptly: "I do wish you and the mother could live together. Do you think it could be managed?"

"I don't know," said Florence, starting; "for some things I should like it."

"I cannot tell you," he continued, flushing slightly as he spoke, "what a great satisfaction it would be to me. I must be frank with you. I always feel that I have done you a great injury." [Pg 138]

"You certainly have not done me an injury; you have added to the pleasure of my life," said Florence.

"I do not suppose we shall see a great deal of each other, and I often wonder why. If I am to be Mrs. Aylmer's heir I shall have to spend most of my life with her; but then, so long as you are in the world, I ought not to hold that position."

"Oh, never mind about that," said Florence.

"She is your aunt?"

"She is my aunt by marriage. It does not matter. We don't get on together. She—she never wishes to see me nor to hear of me."

"But I wonder why; it seems very hard on you. You and your mother are poor, whilst I am no relation. Why should I usurp your place—in fact, be your supplanter?"

"You are not. If you did not have the money, someone else would. I should never be my aunt's heiress."

"And yet she knows you?"

"She did know me."

"Did you ever do anything to offend her?"

"I am afraid I did."

Trevor was on the point of asking "What?" but there was an expression in Florence's face which stayed the word on his lips. She had turned white again, and the tired, drawn expression had come to her eyes.

"You must come home now and have lunch," he said; "afterwards I will take you for another walk, and show you some fresh beauties."

They rose slowly and went back to the house. Lunch was waiting for them, and during the meal [Pg 139] Mrs. Trevor and Maurice talked on many things which delighted and interested Florence immensely. They were both highly intelligent, had a passionate love for horticulture, and also were well read on many other subjects. Florence found some of her school knowledge now standing her in good stead.

In the course of the meal she mentioned Edith Franks.

Both mother and son laughed when her name was spoken of.

"What! that enthusiastic, silly girl who actually wants to be a doctor?" cried Mrs. Trevor. "She is a first-rate girl herself, but her ideas are—"

"You must not say anything against Edith Franks, mother," exclaimed her son. "For my part, I think she is very plucky. I have no doubt," he added, "that women doctors can do very good work."

"She is much too learned for me, that is all," replied Mrs. Trevor; "but I hear she is to undergo her examinations in America. I trust the day will never come when it will be easy for a woman to obtain her medical degree in this country. It is horrible to think of anything so unfeminine."

"I do not think Edith Franks is unfeminine," said Florence. "She has been awfully kind to me. I think she is experimenting on me now."

"And that you don't like, my dear?"

"She is very good to me," repeated Florence, "but I do not like it."

Mrs. Trevor smiled, and Maurice gave Florence a puzzled, earnest glance. [Pg 140]

"I do wish, mother," he said suddenly, "that you could arrange to have Miss Aylmer living with you."

"Oh, my dear, it would be much too far, and I know she would not like it. If she has to work for her living, she must be nearer town."

"I am afraid it would not do," said Florence, with a sigh; "but, of course, I—I should love it."

"You have not anything to do yet, have you?" asked Trevor.

"Not exactly." She coloured and looked uncomfortable.

He gave her a keen glance, and once more the thought flashed through Mrs. Trevor's mind: "The girl is hiding a secret; she has a sorrow: what is she trying to conceal? I wish I could draw her secret from her."

The meal over, Trevor and Florence once more wandered on the heath. The day, which had been so sunny and bright in the morning, was now slightly overcast, and they had not walked half a mile before rain overtook them. They had quite forgotten to provide themselves with umbrellas, and Florence's thin dress was in danger of becoming wet through.

As they walked quickly back now, they were overtaken by a man who said to Florence: "I beg your pardon, but may I offer you this umbrella?"

Before she could reply, the stranger looked at Trevor and uttered an exclamation.

"Why, Tom!" cried Trevor. He shook hands heartily with him, and introduced him to Florence: "Mr. Franks—Miss Aylmer." [Pg 141]

"Aylmer?" said the young man; "are you called Florence Aylmer?" He looked full at the girl.

"Yes, and you have a sister called Edith Franks," she answered.

All the colour had left her face, her eyes were full of a sort of dumb entreaty. Trevor gazed at her in astonishment.

"You must come back and see my mother, Franks," he continued, turning again to the young man. "It is very kind of you to offer your umbrella to Miss Aylmer, but I think you must share it with her."

There was no help for it. Florence had to walk under Mr. Franks's umbrella; she had seldom found herself in a more awkward position.

"Of course," she thought, "he will speak of the manuscript."

She rushed recklessly into conversation in order to avoid this, but in vain. During the first pause Mr. Franks said: "I have good news for you, Miss Aylmer. I showed your story to my chief, Anderson, last night. I begged of him to read it at once. He did so to oblige me. He will take it for the *Argonaut*. I thought you would be glad. He wants you to call at the office to-morrow, when he will arrange terms with you.—Forgive us, won't you, Trevor, for talking business; but it was such a chance, coming across Miss Aylmer like this, and I thought she would like to know as soon as possible what a great success she has made."

Trevor glanced at Florence in some astonishment.

"Does this mean that you write?" he said, "and that you have had an article accepted?" [Pg 142]

"A very promising article accepted extremely willingly," said Franks. "Miss Aylmer deserves your hearty congratulations, Trevor. She is a very fortunate young lady indeed."

"I know I am, and I am grateful," said Florence.

Trevor again looked at her.

"She is not happy. What can be wrong?" he said to himself.

"Have you ever published anything before?" continued Franks.

"Never."

"Well, you are lucky. Your style—I do not want to flatter you, but your style is quite formed. You must have been a very successful essay-writer at school."

"No, I never wrote much," said poor Florence. "I—I hate writing," she said the next moment. The words burst impetuously from her lips.

"By all that's wonderful! what do you mean by that? Surely it would be absolutely impossible for anyone who hated writing to do so with your ease and fluency!"

"We are nearly home now, and Miss Aylmer seems very tired," said Trevor. "Will you come in, Franks?"

"No, thanks; I must be getting home. You will call at our office to-morrow, Miss Aylmer?"

"Thank you," said Florence; "at what hour?"

"I shall be in and will introduce you to my chief if you can come at twelve o'clock. Well, good-bye for the present." He raised his hat to Florence, favoured her with a keen glance, said good-bye to Trevor, and turned away.

"I must congratulate you," said Trevor, as the young man and the girl walked up the little path to the house. [Pg 143]

"What for?" she asked. She raised her eyes full of dumb misery to his face.

"For having won a success, and a very honourable one."

"Oh, don't ask me any more," she said; "please, please don't speak of it. I thought I should be so happy to-day."

"But does not this make you happy? I do not understand."

"It makes me terribly miserable. I cannot explain. Please don't ask me."

"I won't; only just let me say that, whatever it is, I am sorry for you."

He held out his hand. The next moment he had taken hers. Her hand, which had been trembling, lay still in his palm. He clasped his own strong, firm hand over it.

"I wish I could help you," he said, in a low voice, and then they both entered the house.

Mrs. Trevor, through the little latticed window in the tiny drawing-room, had witnessed this scene.

"What?" she said to herself. "Is my boy really falling in love with that nice, interesting, but unhappy girl? Of course, I shall not oppose him; but I almost wish it were not to be."

CHAPTER XXII. [Pg 144]

THE STORY ACCEPTED.

Tea was ready prepared. The sun came out after the heavy shower, and Florence found the Trevors even more kind and agreeable than they had been at lunch. When the meal was over, Trevor called his mother out of the room. He spoke to her for a few moments alone, and then she re-entered the little drawing-room.

Florence was seated by the open window, looking out. She was resting her chin on the palm of her hand as she gazed across the rose-garden. At that moment Trevor went quietly by. He stooped to pick one or two roses; then he turned and looked at Florence. Florence smiled very faintly, and a rush of colour came into Trevor's face. Mrs. Trevor then came up to Florence and spoke.

"I do it because my son wishes it," she said, "and I also do it because I take an interest in you. He has told me of your great success in the literary market. You, young and inexperienced, have had an article accepted by so great a magazine as the *Argonaut*. You scarcely know what an immense success you have won. I did not, of course, understand what your occupation in London was likely to be; but if you are to be a writer, why not come and live with me here? I have a nice little room which I can offer you, and this drawing-room will always be at your disposal, for I sit as a rule in [Pg 145] my dining-room. You can go into town when you want to, and you will make me happy, and—and I think Maurice would like it."

As Mrs. Trevor spoke she looked full at the girl, and Florence found herself trembling and even colouring as Trevor's name was mentioned.

"Will you think over it, my dear," said Mrs. Trevor, "and let me know?"

"I will think over it and let you know. You are very kind to me. I scarcely know how to thank you enough," replied Florence.

"As to the terms," continued Mrs. Trevor, "they would be very moderate. My cottage is my own, and I have few expenses. I could take you in and make you comfortable for fifteen shillings a week."

"Oh!" said Florence. She thought of that money which was getting daily less. She looked into the lovely garden and her heart swelled within her. Her first impulse was to throw her arms round Mrs. Trevor's neck: to say it would be peace, comfort, and happiness to live with her. She would save money, and her worst anxieties would be removed. But she restrained herself. There was a heavy weight pressing against her heart, and even the widow's kindness scarcely touched her.

"I will let you know. You are more than kind," she said.

A moment afterwards she had said good-bye to Mrs. Trevor, and Maurice and she were hurrying down the hill to meet the omnibus which was to convey the girl back to Prince's Mansions.

"My mother has told you what we both wish?" he said. "To be honest with you, I feel that we owe [Pg 146] you something. I am usurping your place; I can never get over that fact."

"I wish you wouldn't think of it, for it is not the truth," said Florence. "I have told you already that even if you did not exist I should never inherit a farthing of my aunt's money, and what is more," she added, the crimson dyeing her cheeks, "I wouldn't take it if she offered it to me."

"You are a strange girl," he said. He bade her good-bye as she entered the omnibus, and then turned to walk up Hampstead Hill once again.

The next day at twelve o'clock Florence Aylmer, neatly dressed, and looking bright and purposeful, and no longer overpowered by any sense of remorse, appeared at Mr. Anderson's office. She was received with the politeness which is ever accorded to the successful. The very clerks in the outer office seemed to know that she was not to be confounded with the ordinary young person who appears daily and hourly offering unsaleable wares. Florence's wares were saleable—more than saleable. She was ushered into a room to wait for a moment, and then very soon Franks appeared on the scene.

"How do you do, Miss Aylmer?" he said, coming up in his quick way, and shaking hands with her. "I am very pleased to see you. Will you come with me now, as I should like to introduce you to Mr. Anderson?"

They left the waiting-room together, went up some broad stairs, and entered a very spacious apartment on the first floor. Here an elderly man, of tall presence, with grey hair and a hooked nose, was waiting to receive them. He stood up when Florence appeared, bowed to her, and then [Pg 147] held out his hand.

"Will you seat yourself, Miss Aylmer?" he said.

Florence did so. Mr. Anderson stood on the hearth and looked her all over. He had a keen, hawk-like glance, and his scrutiny was very penetrating. Florence found herself colouring under his

gaze. She had been full of *sangfroid* and almost indifference when she entered the office, but now once again that terrible, overpowering sense of guilt was visiting her.

Mr. Anderson was a Scotchman to the backbone, and a man of very few words.

"I read your story," he said; "it is sharp and to the point. You have a nice style and an original way of putting things. I accepted your story for the *Argonaut*; it may not appear for some months, but it will certainly be published before the end of the year. We had better now arrange terms. What do you think your manuscript worth?"

"Nothing at all," was Florence's unguarded answer.

This was so unexpected that both Franks and the editor smiled.

"You are a very young writer indeed," said Mr. Anderson. "You will soon learn to appraise your wares at their true value. As this is your first effort I will pay you two guineas a thousand words. There are, I think, from five to six thousand words in the manuscript. You will receive a cheque therefore, say, for twelve guineas on the day of publication."

Florence gave a short gasp.

"It really is not worth it," she said again. [Pg 148]

Franks felt inclined to say: "Don't make such a fool of yourself," but he restrained himself.

Mr. Anderson now drew his own chair forward and looked at Florence.

"I should be glad," he said, "to receive further contributions. You have doubtless many ideas, and you have at present the great and inestimable charm of novelty. You write in a fresh way. We are always looking for work of the sort you have given us. I should be sorry if you took your stories to anyone else. Would it be possible to make an arrangement for us to receive all your contributions, say, for twelve months?"

"I assure you," here interrupted Franks, "that this is so unusual an offer that you would be very silly indeed, Miss Aylmer, to reject it."

Florence gazed from one to the other in growing alarm.

"What I mean is this," said Anderson, noticing her perturbation and pitying her supposed innocence. "When your story appears it will attract the attention of the critics. It will receive, beyond doubt, some very favourable comments, and other editors, who equally with myself are looking out for what is fresh and novel, will write to you and ask you to work for them. I do not wish in any way to injure your future prospects; but I think you would do better for yourself, and eventually increase the value of your contributions, by giving us your work during the first year. When can we find room for this first story of Miss Aylmer's, Franks?"

Franks thought for a moment.

"There is no reason why it should not appear in November," he said. "We could dispense with illustrations—at least one illustration will be quite sufficient." [Pg 149]

"Very well; it shall appear then. You will soon receive proofs, Miss Aylmer; and can you let me have another small story of about the same length in a month from now? If your first story is liked we can find room for another in December. You will think over my proposal. I do not want you to hurry nor to appear to coerce you in any way, but we shall be proud to be the publishers who introduced you to, I hope, a very large audience."

Mr. Anderson here got up, and Florence, seeing that the interview was at an end, bowed and went away. Franks accompanied her downstairs.

"You will, of course, accept Mr. Anderson's offer?" he said.

"Of course I shall," replied Florence; "why should I not? But you are both under a mistake with regard to me. I do not suppose any other editors will want my contributions; but if you wish for them you can certainly have them."

She returned home, avoided Edith Franks, and stayed for the remainder of that day in her own attic.

"Soon my pecuniary difficulties will be at an end," she said to herself. "I have not the slightest doubt that I can get some more stories into the *Argonaut* this year. I shall soon get over my remorse; my conscience will soon cease to prick me. If I receive twelve guineas for each story I shall earn a considerable sum. I can then live easily. I do not mind how poorly I live if only I am assured of a certainty."

She walked across the room and looked out; the expression on her face had changed: it had grown hard and defiant. She took up her pen, drew a sheet of note-paper before her, and began to write:— [Pg 150]

"DEAR BERTHA—

"The story is accepted by that new six-penny magazine, the *Argonaut*, and they want more. Please send me something else. I have succumbed to temptation, and

am once again, as you so earnestly desire, in the toils.

"Yours,

"Florence Aylmer."

Having written this letter, Florence proceeded to write another:—

"Dear Mrs. Trevor—

"I have thought of your kind offer of yesterday. Indeed, I have scarcely ceased to think of it since I left you. It is with great, great sorrow that I must decline it. You and your kind son had better think no more about me. I am not what I seem: I am not a good girl nor a nice girl in any way. If I were straight and simple and honest I could be the happiest of the happy in your house; but I am not, and I can never tell you what I really am. Please forget that you ever knew me.

"Yours, with gratitude,

"Florence Aylmer."

CHAPTER XXIII.

[Pg 151]

BERTHA'S JOY.

Bertha Keys found herself in a state of pleasurable excitement. She was in the highest spirits.

Mrs. Aylmer, as she watched her flit about the room, and listened to her gay conversation, and observed her animated face, said to herself: "A more charming companion could not fall to the lot of any woman. Now what is the matter, Bertha?" she said. "Your face quite amuses me; you burst out into little ripples of laughter at the smallest provocation. That dress is extremely becoming; it is a pleasure to see you. What is it, my dear? Have you heard any specially good news?"

"I have heard this news, and I think we ought both to be very happy," said Bertha. "Mr. Trevor comes home this evening; he will be with us to dinner."

Mrs. Aylmer gave her companion a keen, searching glance.

"Miss Keys," she said slowly.

"Yes," said Bertha, pausing and laying her hand lightly on a little table near; "do you want me to do anything?"

"Nothing in especial: you are always doing things for me. You are a good girl and a valuable secretary to me; you suit me to perfection. Now, my dear, I have no wish to part with you." [Pg 152]

"To part with me?" said Bertha. She looked startled and raised her curious greeny-grey eyes with a new expression in them.

"To part with you, Bertha; but if you set your heart on Mr. Maurice Trevor you and I must part."

"What does this mean? Do you want to insult me?"

"No, my dear, by no means; but girls will be girls. How old are you, Miss Keys?"

"I am seven-and-twenty."

"And Maurice is three-and-twenty," said Mrs. Aylmer. "He is four years your junior; but that in affairs of the heart, I am afraid, does not matter much. You like him, I can see. My dear Miss Keys, the moment I see my adopted son paying you the slightest attention you must leave here. I daresay he never will pay you that kind of attention, and probably it is all right; but a word to the wise is enough, eh?"

"Quite enough," said Bertha; "you are a little unkind, my dear friend, to speak to me in that tone, and when I was so happy too. Believe me, I have not the slightest intention of marrying anyone. I have seen too much trouble in married life to care to cast in my lot with the married folks. I shall live with you as your companion as long as you want me. May I not like Mr. Trevor, and be a sort of sister to him?"

"Certainly, only don't be too sisterly or too friendly; do not ask for his confidence; do not think too much about him. He is a charming fellow, but he is not intended for you. My heir must marry as I please, and I am already looking out for a wife for him."

"Indeed; how very interesting!" [Pg 153]

"There is a young girl I happen to know, who lives not far from here. She is extremely handsome, and will have a great deal of money. I mean to invite her to Aylmer's Court next week. Now you, Miss Keys, can do a great deal to promote a friendly feeling between the young people; but I will tell you more of this to-morrow."

"Thank you," replied Bertha. "I wonder," she continued, "who the girl is."

"That, my dear, I will tell you by-and-by. At present you are to know nothing about it."

The sound of wheels was now heard on the gravel and Bertha ran downstairs.

"Poor dear Mrs. Aylmer," she said to herself; "it is easy to blind her after all. I do not at all know at present whether I want to marry Maurice or not; but, whatever happens, I inherit my dear friend's money, either as his wife, or on my own account: it does not in the least matter which. No wonder I am in good spirits! He comes back to-night, and Florence Aylmer has yielded to temptation. I have nothing to fear from her now. The second story will go to her by the first post in the morning. I fancy it will be even more fetching than the one which has already taken the fancy of the editor of the *Argonaut*."

Trevor had now entered the hall, and Bertha went to meet him.

"How do you do?" she said, in her gayest voice. She was dressed in the most becoming way, and looked wonderfully attractive. Her red-gold hair was always a striking feature about her; her complexion at night was of the palest cream and dazzlingly fair; her eyes looked big, and as she [Pg 154] raised them to Trevor's face they wore a pathetic expression. He wrung her hand heartily, asked for Mrs. Aylmer, said that he would go to his room to get ready for dinner, and ran upstairs three steps at a time.

"How nice he looks!" thought the girl; "it would be possible for me to like him even as much as Mrs. Aylmer fears, but I will not show my hand at present. What does this fresh combination mean? I wonder who the girl is who is to be brought to Aylmer's Court on purpose to be wooed by Maurice Trevor."

The dinner-gong sounded, and soon Mrs. Aylmer, Trevor, and Bertha sat around the board. He chatted gaily, telling both the ladies some amusing adventures, and causing Mrs. Aylmer to laugh heartily several times.

"You are a very bad boy to stay away from me so long," she said; "but now you are not to stir: your work is cut out for you. I mean you to take complete control of the estate. To-morrow you and I will have a long conversation on the subject."

"But I am not at all a business man," he answered, frowning slightly and glancing from Bertha to Mrs. Aylmer.

"Never mind; you can learn. You surely ought to know something of what is to be your own eventually!"

"I thought that your steward and Miss Keys managed everything."

"Miss Keys manages a good deal, perhaps too much," said Mrs. Aylmer, frowning, and glancing in a somewhat suspicious way at her companion. "I mean you to manage your own affairs in the [Pg 155] future; but you and I will have a talk after breakfast to-morrow."

"Yes, I shall be glad to have a talk with you," he answered. He looked at her gravely.

Bertha wondered what was passing in his mind.

CHAPTER XXIV. [Pg 156]

TREVOR ASKS BERTHA'S ADVICE.

That same evening, when Mrs. Aylmer had retired to bed and Bertha was about to go to her own room, she met Trevor on the stairs.

"Are you disengaged?" he said. "I should like to speak to you for a moment or two."

"I am certainly disengaged to you," she replied. "What can I do for you?"

"Come back to the drawing-room; the lamps are still alight. I won't keep you many minutes."

They both re-entered the beautiful room. The night was so warm that the windows were open; the footman appeared and prepared to close them, but Trevor motioned him back.

"I will shut up the room," he said; "you need not wait up."

The man withdrew, closing the door softly behind him.

Bertha found herself standing close to Trevor. She looked into his face and noted with a sense of approval how handsome and manly and simple-looking he was. An ideal young Englishman, without guile or reproach. He was looking back at her, and once more that peculiar expression in his honest blue eyes appeared. [Pg 157]

"I want to consult with you," he said: "something is giving me a good deal of uneasiness."

"What is that, Mr. Trevor?"

"When I was in town I met Miss Florence Aylmer."

"Did you really? How interesting!" Bertha dropped lightly into the nearest chair. "Well, and how was the dear Florence? Had she got a berth of any sort? Is she very busy? She is terribly poor, you know."

"She is disgracefully, shamefully poor," was his answer, spoken with some indignation, the colour flaming over his face as he spoke.

Bertha did not say anything, but she looked full at him. After a moment's pause, she uttered one word softly and half below her breath, and that word was simply: "Yes?"

"She is disgracefully poor!" he repeated. "Miss Keys, that ought not to be the case."

"I do not understand you," said Bertha.

"May I explain?" He dropped into a chair near her, and bent forward; his hands were within a couple of inches of hers as they lay in her lap.

"I have had a talk with Miss Aylmer, and find that she is my friend's niece. My benefactress, the lady who has adopted me, is aunt by marriage to the girl, who is now struggling hard to earn a living in London. Between that girl and starvation there is but a very thin wall. I am in a false position. I ought to have nothing to do with Mrs. Aylmer. Florence Aylmer is her rightful heiress; I am in the wrong place. I thought I would speak to you. What would you advise?"

"How chivalrous you are!" said Bertha, and she looked at him again, and her queer big eyes were full of a soft light, a dangerous light of admiration. [Pg 158]

He said to himself: "I never knew before how handsome you could be at times!" and then he turned away, as if he did not want to look at her.

"You are very chivalrous," she said slowly; "but what can you do?"

"You see how manifestly unfair the whole thing is," continued the young man. "I am no relation whatever to Mrs. Aylmer. She knew my mother, it is true; she wanted an heir, and took a fancy to me; she has promised that I am to inherit her wealth. Have you the least idea what her income is, or what wealth I am in the future likely to possess?"

"You will be a very rich man," said Bertha slowly.

"How do you know?"

"Because Mrs. Aylmer has a large yearly income. Her landed estates are considerable, and she has money in many stocks and shares. She has enough money in English Consols alone to give you a considerable yearly income. Think what that means. This money you can realise at a moment's notice. Her own income I cannot exactly tell you; but this I do know, that she does not spend half of it. Thus she is accumulating money, and she means to give it all to you."

"But it is unfair. It cannot be right. I will not accept it."

"Is that kind to your mother? You left off your professional studies in order to take your present position. You thought of your mother at the time. You have often spoken to me about her and your great love for her." [Pg 159]

"I love her, and because I love her I cannot accept the present state of things."

"Why did you accept them in the beginning?"

"I knew nothing of Florence Aylmer: she is the rightful heiress."

"Do you think, if you refuse all this wealth, that she will inherit it?"

"Why not? She ought to inherit it. But there, I have spoken to you; I have but little more to say. My mind is made up. No objections you can urge will make me alter what I have firmly resolved to do. I shall talk to Mrs. Aylmer about her niece to-morrow. I will show her how wrong she is. I will ask her to put that wrong right."

Bertha gave a low laugh. The fear which had risen again in her breast was not allowed to appear; she knew that she must be very careful or she would betray herself. She thought for a moment; then she said softly: "You must do as you please. After all, this is scarcely my affair; but I will tell you what I know."

"What is that?"

"Florence Aylmer at one time did something which offended Mrs. Aylmer."

"Poor girl she told me so herself. What could any young girl do to have such a punishment meted out to her? She ought to be here in your place, Miss Keys; she ought to be here in my place. You and I are not wanted in this establishment."

"Oh, why do you say that? Mrs. Aylmer must have a companion." [Pg 160]

"Well, you can please yourself, of course; but I cannot stay to see injustice done to another."

"You cannot force Mrs. Aylmer to leave her money except where she pleases. She dislikes Miss

Aylmer; she will have nothing to do with her, and she will be very angry with you. You refuse the money and you do not make things any better for Miss Aylmer. Mrs. Aylmer can leave her money to charities. It is easily disposed of."

Trevor sat quite still, gazing out into the summer night. After a pause he walked towards the window and closed it. He fastened the bolts and drew down the blinds; then he turned to Bertha and held out his hand.

"I thought you could have counselled me, but I see you are not on my side," he said. "Good night."

"There is only one thing I must add," said Bertha.

"What is that?"

"If you deliberately choose to injure yourself you must not injure me."

"What do you mean by that? How can I possibly injure you?"

"You can say what you like with regard to Florence Aylmer, but you must not mention one fact."

"What is that?"

"That I happen to know her."

"What do you mean?"

"I do not choose to say what I mean. I trust to your honour not to injure a woman quite as dependent and quite as penniless as Florence Aylmer. I have secured this place, and I wish to stay here. If you are mad, I am sane. I ask you not to mention to Mrs. Aylmer that I know Florence; otherwise, you must go your own gait." [Pg 161]

"I will, of course, respect your confidence, but I do not understand you."

"Some day you will, and also what a great fool you are making of yourself," was Bertha's next remark.

She sailed past him out of the room and up to her own bed-room.

CHAPTER XXV. [Pg 162]

TREVOR'S RESOLVE.

If Trevor had a fault it was obstinacy. He stayed awake for a short time, but finally dropped asleep, having made up his mind, of course, not to injure Bertha Keys, whom he could not understand in the least, but to have, as he expressed it, a sober talk with Mrs. Aylmer. He saw that Bertha, for reasons of her own, was very much against this course, and he resolved to keep out of her way. He rose early and went for a long ride before breakfast. He did not return until he knew Bertha would be busy over household matters, and Mrs. Aylmer would in all probability be alone in her private sitting-room.

He tapped at her door between eleven and twelve o'clock, and at her summons entered and closed it behind him.

"Ah, Maurice, that is good," said the lady; "come and sit near me. I am quite prepared to have a long chat with you."

"And I want to have a long talk with you, Mrs. Aylmer," was his answer. He drew a chair forward, and sat where he could see right out over the landscape.

"It is a beautiful day," said the lady.

"Yes," he replied.

"Maurice," she said, after a pause, "you must know that I am very much attached to you." [Pg 163]

"You have always been extremely good to me," he answered.

"I am attached to you; it is easy to be good to those one loves. I have never had a child of my own; you stand to me in the place of a son."

"But in reality I am not related to you," he answered.

She frowned slightly.

"There are relations of the heart," she said then. "You have touched my heart. There is nothing I would not do for you."

Again he said: "You are very kind."

She was silent for half a minute, then she proceeded: "You are my heir."

He fidgeted.

"Do not speak until I have finished. I do not like to be interrupted. You are my heir, and I mean to settle upon you immediately one thousand pounds a year for your own expenses. You can do what you please with that money."

"It is a great deal too much," he said.

"It is not; it is what you ought to have. You can give some of it to your mother—not a great deal, but a little—and the rest you can spend on yourself, or you can hoard it, just as you like."

"I shall not hoard it," he answered, and his face flushed.

"It will be yours from next month. I am expecting my lawyer, Mr. Wiltshire, to call here this afternoon. Several matters have to be arranged. Maurice, you will live with me for the present; that is, until you marry."

"I do not mean to marry," he answered.

"All young men say that," she replied. "You will marry as others do. You will fall in love and you will marry. I shall be very glad indeed to welcome your wife. She shall have the best and most affectionate welcome from me, and I will treat her as though she were my daughter: just as I treat you, Maurice, as though you were my real son." [Pg 164]

"But I cannot forget that I am not your son," he answered. "Mrs. Aylmer, there is something I must say."

His words disturbed her for a moment; she did not speak, but looked at him in a puzzled manner; then she said: "If you have something disagreeable to tell me (and I cannot imagine what it is), at least hear my point of view first. I am particularly anxious that you should marry. As my heir, you are already comparatively rich, and your expectations are excellent. You will have at my death a very large income. You will also be the owner of this fine property. Now, I should like you to marry, and I should like you to marry wealth."

"Why so? How unfair!" said the young man.

"It is a wish of mine. Wealth attracts wealth. There is a girl whom I have heard of—whom I have, I believe, some years ago seen—a very sweet, very graceful, very pretty girl. Her name is Miss Sharston. She was poor, but I have lately heard that Sir John Wallis, the owner of Cherry Court Park, in Buckinghamshire, is going to make her his heiress. She is coming on a visit here. I cannot, of course, force your inclination, Maurice; but if by any chance you and Catherine Sharston should take a fancy to each other, it would be a union after my own heart."

"Thank you," he answered. He rose immediately to his feet. "You are treating me with your customary liberality. You have always been most liberal, most generous. I am the son of a widow with very small means. My father was strictly a man of honour. He was a soldier, and he fell in his country's cause. I hope that, although he could not leave me gold, he could and did leave me honour. I cannot afford to have my honour tarnished." [Pg 165]

"Maurice! I tarnish your honour! You really make very extraordinary insinuations. What does this mean?"

"You didn't think about it, dear friend; it has not occurred to you to look at it in this light, but, believe me, such is the case."

"Maurice!"

"I only knew of it lately," he continued, "and by an accident. You want to give me a great deal of money now; you want to leave me a large sum of money in the future. You propose that I shall if possible marry a girl who is also to be very rich. That is a subject which cannot even be discussed. I do not think, whatever happens, that I could marry any girl I did not love. If this girl comes here, I shall of course be glad to make her acquaintance, but I do not think it is right or just to her to mention such a subject in connection with her name. But to proceed to other matters. If I were to accept your offer just as you have made it, I should perhaps be able to spend my money, and perhaps in a fashion to enjoy it, but I should no longer feel happy when my brave father's name was mentioned, nor should I feel happy when I looked into the eyes of my real mother."

"Go on, Maurice; this is very quixotic, very extraordinary, and, let me add, very fatiguing," said Mrs. Aylmer. "I make you the best offer I have ever made to anybody, and even you, my dear boy, must recognise limits in our intercourse." [Pg 166]

"I ought not to be your heir," he said; "I will come to the point at once. You ought not to leave your money to me; it is not just nor right."

"And pray may I not leave my money to whom I please?"

"You ought not to leave it to me; you ought to leave it to Miss Aylmer."

"Miss Aylmer! What Miss Aylmer?"

"Her name is Florence. I met her in London. I met her also at Dawlish. She is very poor. She is a brave girl, independent, with courage and ability. She is about to make a striking success in the world of literature; but she is poor—poor almost to the point of starvation. Why should she be so

struggling, and why should I, who am no relative of yours, inherit all this wealth? It won't do, Mrs. Aylmer; and, what is more, I won't have it."

Mrs. Aylmer was so absolutely astonished that she did not speak at all for a moment.

"You are mad," she said then slowly.

"No, I am not mad: I am sane. I shall be very glad to receive a little help from you. I shall be your devoted son in all but name, but I do not want your money: I mean I don't want any longer to be your heir. Give your wealth to Florence Aylmer, and forget that you have made this suggestion to me. Believe me, you will be happy if you do so." [Pg 167]

"Are you in love with this girl?" said Mrs. Aylmer slowly.

"You have no right to ask the question; but I will answer it. I do not think I am in love with her. I believe I am actuated by a sense of justice. I want you to do justice to this girl, and I want to give you in return my undying gratitude and undying respect."

"Indeed; what valuable possessions! Now, my dear Maurice, you have just gone a step too far. As you have spoken of Florence Aylmer, I will tell you something about her. There was a time when I intended to leave her my money. I intended to adopt her, to educate her, to bring her out as my niece and heiress. She herself by her own unworthy conduct prevented my doing so. She acted in a most dishonourable way. I will not tell you what she did, but if you wish to know farther go and see Sir John Wallis, of Cherry Court Park, and ask him what he thinks of Florence Aylmer."

"Then you refuse to do what I ask?"

"I utterly and absolutely refuse to leave Florence Aylmer one halfpenny of my money; and, what is more, the thousand a year which I intend to settle on you will be only given on condition that you do not help Florence Aylmer with one penny of it. Do not answer me now. You are young and impulsive; not a word more at present. I will ask Mr. Wiltshire to postpone his visit for three months. During that time you can consider matters. During that time I expect everything to go on just as usual. During part of that time Miss Sharston and her father and also Sir John Wallis will be my guests. At the end of that time I will again have an interview with you. But unless you promise to give up your present mad ideas, and to let Miss Aylmer pursue her own career, unhelped by you, unmolested by you, I shall find another heir or heiress for my property." [Pg 168]

"I don't want the time to consider," said Maurice, whose face now was white with suppressed feeling. "Let your lawyer come now, Mrs. Aylmer; my mind is made up."

"I will not take your decision now, you foolish boy. You are bound, because of my kindness in the past, to take three months to consider this matter. But leave me; I am tired."

CHAPTER XXVI. [Pg 169]

AT AYLMER'S COURT.

Aylmer's Court was in the full perfection of its autumn beauty when Sir John Wallis, accompanied by Kitty Sharston and her father, drove up the winding avenue as Mrs. Aylmer's guests. A private omnibus from Aylmer's Court was sent to the railway station to meet them, and their luggage was now piled up high on the roof.

Sir John Wallis did not look a day older than when we last saw him in all the glories of his own house, surrounded by the girls whom he had made happy.

Kitty was seated beside her father and opposite to her old friend. She looked sweet and bright, with that gentle, high-bred, intelligent expression which she always wore. Kitty's heart was no longer empty or sad. Her beloved father had come back to live with her, she hoped, as long as life lasted. Her old friend, Sir John Wallis, had only recently declared her his heiress; and, although Kitty would never leave her father for anything that mere money could offer, she was glad to feel that he was no longer anxious about her future.

As to Kitty, herself, however rich she might be, she would always be simple-hearted and think of wealth in the right spirit; for what it could do to promote the happiness of others, and not merely as a means of increasing her own splendour or silly pleasures. [Pg 170]

"You have two fathers, you know, Kitty," said Sir John, as they drove up the avenue. "You are bound to be a very circumspect young lady, as you are under such strict surveillance."

"You need not suppose for a single moment that I am the least afraid of either of you," was her answer, and she gave her head a little toss which was not in the least saucy, but was very pretty to see.

Colonel Sharston smiled and turned to his friend.

"How is it that we have accepted this invitation?" he said. "I do not know Mrs. Aylmer. What sort of woman is she?"

"Oh, a very estimable person. I have known her for many years. I felt that we could not do less than give her a few days of our company, and Aylmer's Court is a beautiful place."

So it truly was—the park undulating away to the edge of the landscape, and acres and acres of forest-land being visible in every direction. There was a lake a little way to the left of the house, on which a small pleasure-boat was now being rowed. In that boat sat a girl dressed in dark blue, with a sailor hat on her head. Kitty bent forward; then she glanced at Sir John Wallis and suddenly squeezed his hand.

"Do you know who is rowing on the lake?" she said.

"Who, my dear? Why, Kitty, you have turned quite white."

"I met her before, but, do you know, I had absolutely forgotten it. She is Mrs. Aylmer's companion, and I believe her right hand." [Pg 171]

"But who is she, dear? What is the matter? You look quite ill."

"Don't you remember Bertha Keys?"

"Miss Keys; why, that was the girl who behaved so badly at the time when I offered my scholarship, was it not?"

"The very same girl," said Kitty.

"And what do you want me to do regarding her, Kitty?"

"I do not know. I don't want to do her any injury. Don't be surprised when you meet her, that is all, and—"

"Kitty, your heart is a great deal too tender. You ought not to belong to this evil world at all," said Sir John, while her father looked at Kitty and asked for an explanation.

"Another time, father. All Sir John has to do is to treat Miss Keys as if he had never met her before."

"Well, I daresay I can manage more than that for your sake, Kitty; and now, here we are at the house."

Mrs. Aylmer and her adopted son, Maurice Trevor, were standing on the steps to meet their guests. The moment she saw Trevor, Kitty smiled and took an eager step forward to meet him. He held out his hand.

"This is a real pleasure," she said. "I had forgotten all about your being here. Do you remember Dawlish?"

"Of course I do," he answered. "I do not easily forget pleasant occasions."

Mrs. Aylmer now turned to Kitty, took her hand in hers, and, turning her gently round, looked into her face. It was a good face, eyes of the sweetest grey, delicate colouring, an intelligent forehead, lips true and pure and honest. Mrs. Aylmer scarcely knew why she sighed, and why a [Pg 172] wish rose up in her heart that she had never felt before: that Maurice, the boy she truly loved, should really like and marry this girl. Just for the moment she forgot all about Kitty's future circumstances; she welcomed her for herself.

"Would you like to go for a walk before dinner?" said Trevor. "Miss Keys is rowing on the lake; we will go to meet her."

"I should be delighted. May I go, father?" said Kitty.

"Certainly, my love."

"Then will you two gentlemen come into the house?" said Mrs. Aylmer. She nodded to Trevor, who walked off immediately with Kitty. As soon as they got out of ear-shot, Kitty faced her companion.

"I never knew that I should meet you here. I am so glad. I heard from Florence a few days ago; she said you were so good and kind to her when you were in London. I must thank you now in her name."

"I should like to be kind to her, but in reality I was able to do only very little for her," said Trevor. "Does she write often to you? How is she getting on?"

"She seems to me to be getting on in the most wonderful way. She has quite a considerable amount of literary work to do. Two of her stories have already been accepted, and she is asked to do a third, and I have no doubt that other work also will fall in her way. She will now be able to support herself comfortably. I cannot tell you what a relief it is to me."

Trevor smiled.

"She is wonderfully clever and interesting," he said. "I am glad she is your friend. She has talked [Pg 173] to me about you and——"

Just at that moment Bertha Keys, having moored her little boat came to meet them.

She came straight up to Kitty and spoke in a defiant voice, and as if she were talking to a perfect stranger.

"How do you do?" she said. "I suppose I must introduce myself. My name is Miss Keys. I am Mrs. Aylmer's companion. I shall be pleased to do everything I can to promote your comfort while at Aylmer's Court. Have you been here long?"

"Only a few moments," answered Kitty, taking her cue, "and Mr. Trevor has most kindly offered to show me round the place. I am so tired of sitting still that it is delightful to move about again."

"Then I won't keep you. Dinner is at half-past seven, and the dressing-gong sounds at seven. Mrs. Aylmer's maid will help you to dress, Miss Sharston—that is, unless you have brought your own."

"Oh, I don't keep a maid," said Kitty merrily; "I hate maids, and in any case I am not rich enough to afford one."

Miss Keys raised her brows in a somewhat supercilious way.

CHAPTER XXVII.

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BERTHA'S SECRET.

The two young people walked about, talking of nothing in particular, until at last it was time for them both to return to the house. Kitty went up to her own room, managed to dress before Mrs. Aylmer's maid appeared, and then proceeded to the drawing-room. There she found Bertha alone. She went straight up to her.

"Do you wish it known?" she said.

"Wish what known? I do not understand," replied Bertha.

Bertha was looking her very best in a black lace dress with some Gloire de Dijon roses in her belt. She raised her eyes and fixed them insolently on Kitty.

"Do I wish what known?" she repeated.

"Why, that I met you, that I knew you, you understand. You must understand. I thought, as you were here, that it would injure you if I spoke of it."

Bertha suddenly took hold of Kitty's hands and drew her into the recess by the window.

"Keep it a secret," she said; "pretend you never knew me. Don't tell your father; don't tell Sir John."

"But Sir John remembers you—he must remember you. You know what happened at Cherry Court School. How can he possibly forget?"

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"I shall be ruined if it is known. Mrs. Aylmer must not know. Get Sir John to keep it a secret; you must—you shall."

"I have asked him not to speak of it; but I must understand how you came to be here. I will say nothing to-night. To-morrow I will speak to you," said Kitty.

Just then other people entered the drawing-room, and the two girls immediately separated.

Sir John, having taken his cue from Kitty, treated Miss Keys as a stranger. She was very daring and determined, and she looked better than she had ever looked in her life before. Her eyes were shining and her clear complexion grew white and almost dazzling. No circumstance could ever provoke colour into her cheeks, but she always looked her very best at night, and no dress became her like black lace, so dazzlingly fair were her neck and arms, so brilliant her plentiful hair.

Sir John and Colonel Sharston looked at her more than once—Sir John with that knowledge in his eyes which Bertha knew quite well he possessed, and Colonel Sharston with undisguised admiration.

In the course of the evening the Colonel beckoned Kitty to his side.

"I like the appearance of that girl," he said; "but she has a strange face: she must have a history. Why are we not to mention to Mrs. Aylmer that you already knew her, Kitty?"

"I will tell you another time, father," answered Kitty. Then she added, in a low voice: "Oh, I am sorry for her, very sorry. It might ruin her, father, if it were known; you would not ruin her, would you?"

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"Of course not, my dear child, and I will certainly respect your wish."

The next day, after breakfast, Kitty found herself alone with Bertha. Bertha was feeding some pigeons in a dove-cote not far from the house. Kitty ran up to her and touched her on the arm.

"I have made up my mind," said Kitty.

"Yes?" answered Bertha.

There was a fresh note in Kitty's voice—a note of resolve. Her eyes looked full of determination; she was holding herself very erect. Bertha had never been worried by the thought of Kitty: a girl in her opinion so insignificant. Now she looked at her with a new feeling of terror and also respect.

"I don't understand," she said; "in what way have you made up your mind?"

"I have spoken to Sir John and also to my father. They know—they cannot help knowing—that I knew you, and that my dear friend, Sir John Wallis, knew you some years ago; but we do not want to injure you, so we will not say a word about it. You can rest quite content; we will not talk of your past."

"In particular you will not talk of my past to Mr. Trevor?"

"No, not even to Mr. Trevor. In short," continued Kitty, "we have made up our minds to respect your secret, but on a condition."

"Yes?" said Bertha. She spoke in a questioning tone.

"As long as you behave in a perfectly straightforward way; as long as I have no reason to feel that you are doing anything underhand to anybody's name, we will respect your secret and leave you [Pg 177] undisturbed in the possession of your present post. I think," continued Kitty, "that I partly understand matters. You have come here without telling Mrs. Aylmer what occurred at Cherry Court School and at Cherry Court Park; you don't want her to know how terribly you injured my great friend, Florence Aylmer. If you will leave Florence alone now, if you will do nothing further in any way to injure her, I and those I belong to will respect your secret. But if I find that you are tampering with Florence's happiness, then my duty will be plain."

"What will your duty be?" said Bertha. As she spoke she held out a lump of sugar to a pretty white fantail which came flying to receive it. She raised her eyes as she spoke and looked full at Kitty.

"I shall tell what I know," said Kitty. "I think that is all." She turned on her heel and walked away.

CHAPTER XXVIII. [Pg 178]

A SMILING WORLD.

Things were going well now with Florence Aylmer. She was earning money, and it was unnecessary for her to live any longer in the top attic of Prince's Mansions. She had got over her first discomfort; her conscience no longer pricked her; she took an interest in the situation, and sometimes laughed softly to herself. She knew that she was losing a good deal: that the worth and stability of her character were being slowly undermined. But she was winning success: the world was smiling at her just because she was successful, and she resolved to go on now, defying fate.

She wrote often to her mother and to Kitty Sharston, and told both her mother and Kitty of her successes. She never wrote to Bertha except about business. Bertha as a rule, enclosed directed envelopes to herself, so that Florence's writing should not be seen by Mrs. Aylmer or Trevor or any guests who might be staying in the house. Bertha was very wise in her generation, and when she did a wrong thing she knew at least how to do that wrong thing cleverly.

Florence was now quite friendly with Edith Franks. Edith took an interest in her; she still believed that there was something behind the scenes—something which she could not quite [Pg 179] fathom—but at the same time she fully and with an undivided heart believed in Florence's great genius, as did also her brother Tom.

By Edith's advice Florence secured the room next to hers, and the girls were now constantly together. Tom often dropped in during the evenings, and took them many times to the play.

Florence began to own that life could be enjoyable even with a heavy conscience and tarnished honour. She was shocked with herself for feeling so. She knew that she had fallen a good many steps lower than she had fallen long ago when she was an inmate of Cherry Court School; nevertheless, there seemed no hope or chance of going back. She had to go forward and trust to her secret never being discovered.

Early in November, or, rather, the latter end of October, her first story was published in the *Argonaut*. It was sufficiently striking, terse, and original to receive immediate attention from more than one good review. She was spoken of as a young writer of great promise, and a well-known critic took the trouble to write a short paper on her story. This mention gave her, as Tom assured her, a complete success. She was quoted in several society journals, and one well-known paper asked for her photograph. All the expectations of the *Argonaut* were more than realised, and some people said that Florence was the coming woman, and that her writings would be quite

as popular as those of the best-known American fiction writers. Hers was the first short story of any promise which had appeared in the English magazines for some time. The next from her pen was eagerly awaited, and it was decided that it was to be published in the December number. [Pg 180]

Bertha, having provided Florence with the story, she carefully re-wrote it in her own hand, and it was sent to the editor. It was a better story than the first, but more critical. There was a cruel note about it. It was harrowing. It seemed to go right down into the heart, and to pierce it with a note of pain. It was a wonderful story for a girl of Florence's age to have written. The editor was charmed.

"I don't like the tone of the story," he said to Franks; "I don't think that I should particularly care to have its author for my wife or daughter, but its genius is undoubted. That girl will make a very big mark. We have been looking for someone like her for a long time. We have had no big stars in our horizon. She may do anything if she goes on as well as she has begun."

"And yet she does not look specially clever," said Franks, in a contemplative voice. "Her speech is nothing at all remarkable; in fact, in conversation I think her rather dull than otherwise."

"I was taken with her face on the whole," said the editor; "it was strong, I think, and, with all our knowledge, we can never tell what is inside a brain. She at least has a remarkable one, Franks. We must make much of her: I don't want her to be snapped up by other editors. We must raise her terms. I will give her three guineas a thousand words for this new story."

Franks called upon his sister and Florence Aylmer on the evening of the day when the editor of the *Argonaut* made this remark: he found them both in his sister's comfortable room. Florence was reclining on the sofa, and Edith was busily engaged over some of her biological specimens. [Pg 181]

"Oh, dear!" said Franks, as he entered the room; "why do you bring those horrors home, Edith?"

"They are all right; I keep them in spirit," she replied. "Don't interrupt me; go and talk to Florence: she is in a bad humour this evening."

"In a bad humour, are you?" said Franks. He drew a chair up, and sat at the foot of Florence's sofa.

She was nicely dressed, her hair was fashionably arranged, she had lost that look of hunger which had made her face almost painful to see, and she received Franks with a coolness which was new-born within her.

"I don't know why you should be depressed," he said; "anyhow, I hope to have the great pleasure of driving the evil spirits away. I have come with good news."

"Indeed!" answered Florence.

"Yes; my editor, Mr. Anderson, is so pleased with your second story, 'The Judas Tree,' that he is going to raise his terms. You are to receive three guineas a thousand words for your manuscript. It is, I think, exactly six thousand words in length. He has asked me to hand you a cheque to-night. Will you accept it?"

As Franks spoke, he took out his pocket-book and handed Florence a cheque for eighteen guineas.

"You will be a rich girl before long," he said.

"It seems like it," she answered. She glanced at the cheque without any additional colour coming to her face, and laid it quietly on a little table by her side.

"And now, Miss Aylmer, there is something I specially want you to do for me. I hope you will not refuse it." [Pg 182]

"I will certainly do what I can," she answered.

"It is this. The *Argonaut* is, of course, our monthly magazine. It holds the very first position amongst the six-pennies, and has, as you doubtless know, an enormous circulation. You will very soon be the fashion. We are about to issue a weekly paper, a sort of review. We trust it will eclipse even the *Spectator* and the *Saturday*, and we want a paper from your pen. We want it to be on a special subject—a subject which is likely to cause attention. Can you and will you do it? Anderson begged of me to put the question to you, and I do so also on my own account."

"But what subject do you want me to write upon?" said Florence, feeling sick and faint, and yet not knowing at first how to reply.

"The subject is to be about women as they are. They are coming to the front, and I want you to talk about them just as you please. You may be satirical or not, as it strikes your fancy. I want you in especial to attack them with regard to the æsthetic craze which is so much in fashion now. If you like to show them that they look absolutely foolish in their greenery-yallery gowns, and their hair done up in a wisp, and all the rest of the thing, why, do so; then you can throw in a note about a girl like my sister."

"Oh, come!" exclaimed Edith, from her distant table, "that would be horribly unfair."

"Anyhow, I want you to write about woman in her improved aspects; that is the main thing," said Franks. "Will you do it or will you not?" [Pg 183]

Florence thought for a wild moment. It would be impossible for Bertha to help her with this paper. She could not get information or subject-matter in time. Dare she do it?

"I would rather not," she said.

Franks face fell.

"That is scarcely kind," he said; "you simply must do it."

"You will not refuse Tom," said Edith, who had apparently not been listening, but who now jumped up and came forward. "What is it, Tom? What do you want Florence to do?"

Tom briefly explained matters.

"It is for our new venture," he said. "Miss Aylmer is scarcely the fashion yet, but she soon will be. It is to be a signed article—'Woman in Her Many Crazes' can be the title. No one can know more on the matter than she does."

"Oh, I'll prime you up with facts, if that is all," said Edith; "you must do it: it would be most ungenerous and unkind to refuse Tom after the way he has brought you to the front."

"But I must refuse," said Florence. She rose from the sofa; her face looked pale with desperation.

"That horrid secret, whatever it is, is beginning to awake once more," thought the astute Edith to herself. She looked at Florence with what Tom called her scientific face.

"Sit down," she said, "sit down. Why should you not do it?"

"Because I am no good at all with that class of paper." [Pg 184]

"But your style will be invaluable, and you need not say much," said Franks. "We want just the same simple terse, purely Saxon style. We want one or two of your ideas. You need not make it three thousand words long: it does not really matter. You will be well paid. I have the editor's permission to offer you twelve guineas. Surely you will not refuse such a valuable cheque."

Florence looked with almost vacant eyes at the cheque which was lying on the table near her. The whole thing seemed like black magic.

"I suppose I must try," she said; "I have never written any prose worth reading in my life. You will be dreadfully disappointed; I know you will."

"I am quite certain we shall not be disappointed; anyhow, I am going to risk it. You must not go back on your promise. Write your paper to-morrow morning when you are fresh; then post it to me in the evening. Good-bye. I am awfully obliged to you."

The young journalist took his departure before Florence had time to realise what she had done. She heard his steps descending the stairs, and then turned with lack-leisure eyes to Edith.

"What have I done?" she cried.

"Done?" said Edith, in a tone of some impatience. "Why, your duty, of course. You could not refuse Tom after all his kindness to you. Where would you be but for him—but for me? Do you suppose that, just because you are clever, you would have reached the position you have done if it had not been for my brother? You must do your very best for him."

"Oh, don't scold me, please, Edith," said poor Florence. [Pg 185]

"I don't mean to; but really your queer ways of accepting Tom's favours exasperate me now and then."

"Perhaps I had better go to my own room," said Florence. "I am in your way, am I not?"

"When you talk nonsense you are. When you are sensible I delight to have you here. Lie down on the sofa once more, and go on reading this last novel of George Eliot's: it will put some grit into you."

Edith returned once more to her task, lit a strong lamp which she had got for this special purpose, put on her magnifying-glasses, adjusted her microscope, and set to work.

Florence knew that she was lost to all externals for the next hour or so. She herself took up her book and tried to read. Half an hour before this book had interested her, now she found it dry as sawdust; she could not follow the argument nor interest herself in the tale. She let it drop on her lap, and stared straight before her. How was she to do that which she said she would do? Her crutch was no longer available. The ghost who really supplied all her brilliant words and felicitous turns of speech and quaint ideas was not to be secured on any terms whatsoever. What could she do?

She felt restless and uncomfortable.

"I did wrong ever to consent to it, but now that I have begun I must go on taking in the golden sovereigns," she said to herself, and she took up the cheque for eighteen guineas, looked at it eagerly, and put it into her purse. Starvation was indeed now far removed. Florence could help her mother and support herself; but, nevertheless, although she was now well fed and well clothed and comfortably housed, she at that moment had the strongest regret of all her life for [Pg 186]

the old hungry days when she had been an honest, good girl, repentant of the folly of her youth, and able with a clear conscience to look all men in the face.

"But as I have begun I must go on," she said to herself. "To court discovery now would be madness. I cannot, I will not court it. Come what may, I must write that article. How am I to do it, and in twenty-four hours? Oh, if I could only telegraph to Bertha!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

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ALMOST BETRAYED.

Florence spent a restless night. She rose early in the morning, avoided Edith, and went off as soon as she could to the British Museum. She resolved to write her article in the reading-room. She was soon supplied with books and pamphlets on the subject, and began to read them. Her brain felt dull and heavy; her restless night had not improved her mental powers; try hard as she would, she could not think. She had never been a specially good writer of the Queen's English, but she had never felt worse or more incapable of thought than she did this morning. Write something, however, she must. Tossed about as she had been in the world, she had not studied the thoughts of men and women on this special subject. She could not, therefore, seize the salient points from the pamphlets and books which she glanced through.

The paper was at last produced, and was not so good as the ordinary schoolgirl's essay. It was feeble, without metaphor, without point, without illustration. She did not dare to read it over twice.

"It must go," she said to herself; "I can make up for it by a specially brilliant story of Bertha's for the next number. What will Mr. Franks say? I only trust he won't find me out."

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She directed her miserable manuscript to Thomas Franks, Esq., at the office of the *Argonaut*, and as she left the museum late in the afternoon of that day dropped the packet into the pillar-box. She then went home.

Edith Franks was waiting for her, and Edith happened to be in a specially good humour.

"Have you done the article?" she said.

"Yes," replied Florence, in a low voice.

"I am glad of it. I felt quite uneasy about you. You seemed so unwilling to do such a simple thing last night."

"It was not at all a simple thing to me. I am no good at anything except fiction."

Edith gave her foot an impatient stamp.

"Don't talk rubbish," she said; "you know perfectly well that your style must come to your aid in whatever you try to write. Then your fiction is not so remarkable for plot as for the careful development of character and your pithy remarks. Your powers of epigram would be abundantly brought to the fore in such a subject as Tom asked you to write about. But never mind, my dear, it is your pleasure to duplicate yourself—I do not think it is at all a worldly-wise habit; but, of course, that is your affair. Now come into the dining-saloon at once. I have good news for you. Tom has obtained tickets for us all three to see Irving in his great piece—'The Bells.'"

Florence certainly was cheered up by this news. She wanted to forget herself, to forget the miserable article which she vainly and without real knowledge of the ordinary duties of an editor hoped that Tom Franks would not even read. She ate her dinner with appetite, and went upstairs

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to her room in high good humour. Her means were sufficiently good to enable her to dress prettily, and she, Edith, and Tom found themselves just before the curtain rose in comfortable stalls at the theatre. Franks was in an excellent humour and in high spirits. He chatted merrily to both girls, and Florence had never looked better. Franks gave her a glance of downright admiration from time to time. Suddenly he bent forward and whispered to her: "What about my article?"

"I posted it to you some hours ago," she answered.

"Ah! that is good." A smile of contentment played round his lips. "I look forward most eagerly to reading it in the morning," he said: "it will be at my office by the first post, of course."

"I suppose so," said Florence, in a listless voice. Her gaiety and good humour suddenly deserted her.

The play proceeded; Edith was all critical attention, Franks also warmly approved, and Florence forgot herself in her absorbing interest. But between the acts the thought of her miserable schoolgirl essay came back to haunt her. Just before the curtain rose for the final act she touched Franks on his sleeve.

"What is it?" he said, looking at her.

"I wish you would make me a promise."

"What is that?"

"Don't read the stuff I have sent you; it is not good. If you don't like it, send it back to me."

"I cannot do that, for I have advertised your name. You simply must put something into the first number, but of course it will be good: you could not write anything poor." [Pg 190]

"Oh, you don't know. Mine is a queer brain: sometimes it won't act at all. I was not pleased with the article. Perhaps the public would overlook it, if you would only promise not to read it."

"My dear Miss Aylmer, I would do a great deal for you, but now you ask for the impossible. I must read what you have written. I have no doubt I shall be charmed with it."

Florence sat back in her seat; she could do nothing further.

The next day, when he arrived at his office, Tom Franks eagerly pounced upon Florence's foolscap envelope. He tore it open and began to read the silly stuff she had written. He had not gone half-way down the first page before the whole expression of his face altered. Bewilderment, astonishment, almost disgust, spread themselves over his features. He turned page after page, looked back at the beginning, glanced at the end, then set himself deliberately to digest Florence's poor attempt from the first word to the last. He flung the paper from him with a gesture of despair. Had she done it to trick him? Positively the production was scarcely respectable. A third-form schoolgirl would have done better. There were even one or two mistakes in spelling, the grammar was slipshod, the different utterances what few schoolgirls would have attempted to make: so banal, so threadbare, so used-up were they. Where was that terse and vigorous style? Where were those epigrammatic utterances? Where was the pure Saxon [Pg 191] which had delighted his scholarly mind in the stories which she had written?

He rang his office bell sharply. A clerk appeared.

"Bring me the last number of the *Argonaut*," he said.

It was brought immediately, and Franks opened it at Florence's last story. He read a sentence or two, compared the style of the story with the style of the article, and finally shut up the *Argonaut* and went into his chief's room.

"I have a disappointment for you, Mr. Anderson," he said.

"What is that, Franks?" asked the chief, raising his head from a pile of papers over which he was bending.

"Why, our *rara avis*, our new star of the literary firmament, has come to a complete collapse. Something has snuffed her out; she has written rubbish."

"What? you surely do not allude to Miss Aylmer?"

"I do. I asked her to do a paper for the *General Review*, thinking that her name would be a great catch in the first number. She consented, I must say with some unwillingness, and sent me *this*. Look it over and tell me what you think."

Mr. Anderson read the first one or two sentences.

"She must have done it to play a trick on us," he said; "it is absolutely impossible that this can be her writing."

"It cannot be printed," said Franks; "what is to be done?"

"You had better go and see her at once. Have you any explanation to offer?"

"None; it must be a trick. See for yourself how her opening sentence starts in this story: there is a dignity about each word; the style is beautiful. Compare it with this." As Franks spoke he [Pg 192] pointed to a paragraph of the *Argonaut* and a paragraph in poor Florence's essay. "I will rush off at once and see if I can find her," he said; "she must have sent this to pay me out. She did not want to write; I did not think she would be so disobliging."

"Offer her bigger terms to send us a paper to-morrow. We must overlook this very shabby trick she has played on us."

"Of course, the thing could not possibly be printed," said Franks. "I will go and see her."

He snatched up his hat, hailed a hansom, and drove straight to Prince's Mansions, and arrived there just as Florence was going out. She turned pale when she saw him. One glance at his face made her fear the worst. He had found her out. She leant up against the lintel of the door.

"What is it?" she said.

He glanced at her, and said, in a gruff voice: "Come up to my sister's room. I must speak to you."

They went upstairs together. As soon as they entered the room, Florence turned and faced Franks.

"You—of course you won't use it?"

"No; how can I use it? It is stuff; it is worse: it is nursery nonsense. Why did you send it to me? I did not think that you would play me such a trick."

"I told you I could only write fiction."

"Nonsense, nonsense! I might have expected something poor compared to your fiction; but at least you did know the Queen's English: you did know how to spell. You have behaved very badly, and it is only because the governor and I feel certain that this is a trick that we put up with it. [Pg 193] Come, have we not offered you enough? I will pay you a little more, but another essay I must have, and in twenty-four hours from the present time."

"And suppose I refuse?"

"In that case, Miss Aylmer, I shall be driven to conclude that your talent was but fictitious, and that—"

"That I am a humbug?" said Florence. A look came into her eyes which he could not quite fathom. It was a hungry look. They lit up for a moment, then faded, then an expression of resolve crept round her lips.

"I will write something," she said; "but give me two days instead of one."

"What do you mean by two days?"

"I cannot let you have it to-morrow evening; you shall have it the evening after. It shall be good; it shall be my best. Give me time."

"That's right," he said, grasping her hand. "Upon my word you gave me a horrid fright. Don't play that sort of trick again, that's all. We are to have that article, then, in two days?"

"Yes, yes."

He left her. The moment he had done so Florence snatched up the paper which he had brought back, tore it into a hundred fragments, thrust the fragments into the fire, and rushed downstairs. She herself was desperate now. She went to the nearest telegraph-office and sent the following message to Bertha Keys:—

"Expect me at Aylmer's Court to-morrow at ten. Must see you. You can manage so that my aunt does not know."

CHAPTER XXX. [Pg 194]

THE TELEGRAM.

The Sharstons and Sir John Wallis were enjoying themselves very much at Aylmer's Court. Mrs. Aylmer exerted herself to be specially agreeable. She could, when she liked, put aside her affected manner: she could open out funds of unexpected knowledge: she at least knew her own country well: she took her guests to all sorts of places of local interest: she had the best of the neighbours to dine in the evenings: she had good music and pleasant recitations and round games for the young folks, and dancing on more than one occasion in the great hall. The time passed on wings, and the three guests thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

Both Trevor and Bertha were greatly responsible for this happy state of things. Bertha, having quickly discovered that Kitty would not betray her secret, resumed that manner which had always made her popular. Bertha, in reality one of the most selfish women who ever lived—who had wrecked more lives than one in the course of her unscrupulous career—could be to all appearance the most absolutely unselfish. In great things she was selfish to the point of cruelty; in little things she completely forgot herself. So day after day, by tact, by apparent kindness, by much cleverness, she led the conversation into the brightest channels. She suggested, without [Pg 195] seeming to suggest, this and that way of passing the time. She was always ready to play anybody's accompaniment or any amount of dance music: to lead the games: to promote the sports. Kitty could not help owning that she was charming. Now and then, it is true, she sighed to herself and wished that she could forget that dark spot in Bertha's past.

Sir John Wallis looked often at the strange girl with a feeling of surprise struggling with a new-born respect. After all, was he to bring up this girl's past to her? She had conquered, no doubt. She had turned over a new leaf. Of course, he and Kitty and his old friend, Colonel Sharston, would never breathe a word to injure her. And Bertha, who was quick to read approval in the eyes of those she wished to please, felt her heart grow light within her, and thought little of danger.

Trevor, too, was more or less off his guard. He knew what Mrs. Aylmer expected of him, but he resolved to shut away the knowledge. He liked Kitty most heartily for herself. She was a charming companion: she was one of the most amiable and one of the sweetest girls he had ever met; but the sore feeling in his heart of hearts with regard to Florence never deserted him, and it was her image which rose before his eyes when he looked at Kitty, and it was about Florence he liked best to speak. Kitty added to all her other charms by being delighted to talk on this

congenial theme. She and Trevor often went away for long walks together, and during those walks they talked of Florence, and Trevor gradually but surely began to give some of his confidences to his young companion and to tell her how bitterly he felt the position in which Mrs. Aylmer had placed her own niece. [Pg 196]

"I cannot take her place," he said; "you would not if you were placed in the same position?"

"If I were you I would not," said Kitty, in her gentle voice; but then she added, with a sigh: "I do not think even you know Mrs. Aylmer. Florence used to tell me all about her long ago. She is a very strange woman. Although she is so kind to us, I am afraid she is terribly unforgiving; I do not think she will ever forgive poor Flo."

Trevor was silent for a moment, then he said slowly: "This mystery of the past, am I never to know about it?"

Kitty looked at him, and her gentle grey eyes flashed. "You are never to know about it from me," she said.

He bowed, and immediately turned the conversation.

A fortnight had nearly gone by, and the guests now felt themselves thoroughly at home at Aylmer's Court, when late one afternoon the telegraph-boy was seen coming down the avenue. He met Trevor and asked him immediately if Miss Keys were at home. Trevor replied that he did not know where Miss Keys was. It turned out that she had been away for several hours. Trevor consented to take charge of the telegram. As no answer was possible, the boy departed on his way.

Bertha had gone to see an old lady for Mrs. Aylmer, and did not come home until it was time to dress for dinner. It was quite late, for they dined at a fashionable hour. The telegram was lying on the hall table. She saw that it was addressed to herself, started, for she did not often receive telegrams, and tore it open. Its contents certainly were the reverse of reassuring. If Florence appeared on the scene now, what incalculable mischief she might effect! How could she, Bertha, stop the headstrong girl? She glanced at the clock and stamped her foot with impatience. The little telegraph-office in the nearest village had been closed for the last hour and a half. It would be impossible, except by going by train to the nearest town, to send off a telegram that night. [Pg 197]

Bertha went up to her room, feeling intensely uncomfortable. In spite of all her efforts, she could scarcely maintain conversation during the evening which followed.

In the course of that evening Trevor asked her if she had received her telegram.

"It came two or three hours ago," he said; "the messenger wanted to wait for an answer, but I knew there was no use in that, as you would not be home until late. I hope you have had no bad news."

"Irritating news," she replied, in a whisper; "pray don't speak of it to the others. I don't want it mentioned that I have had a telegram."

He glanced at her, and slightly raised his brows. She saw that he was disturbed, and that a sort of suspicion was stealing over him. She came nearer, and by way of looking over the illustrated paper which he was glancing through, said, in a very low voice: "It was from Florence Aylmer. She has got herself into a fresh scrape, I am afraid."

He threw back his head with an impatient movement.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, but if you wish to do her a good turn you will not mention the fact that I have received this telegram." [Pg 198]

There was nothing more to be said, and Trevor walked across the room to the piano. He and Kitty both had good voices, and they sang some duets together.

During the night which followed Bertha slept but little. Again and again she took up Florence's telegram and looked at it. She would be at Hamslade, the nearest station to Aylmer's Court, between nine and ten o'clock. Bertha resolved, come what would, to meet her at the station.

"Whatever happens, she must not come here," thought Bertha; "but how am I to get to the station, so early too, just when Mrs. Aylmer wants me for a hundred things? Stay, though: I have an idea."

CHAPTER XXXI. [Pg 199]

BERTHA WRITES THE ESSAY.

Bertha got up early next morning to act upon the idea that had occurred to her on the previous evening. She ran downstairs and had a private interview with the cook. It was Mrs. Aylmer's custom, no matter what guests were present, to breakfast in her room, and immediately after

breakfast Bertha, as a rule, waited on her to receive her orders for the day. These orders were then conveyed to the cook and to the rest of the servants.

Breakfast was never over at Aylmer's Court until long past nine o'clock, and if Bertha wished to keep Florence from putting in a most undesired appearance, she must be at Hamslade Station at half-past nine. She had a chat with the cook and then wrote a brief note to Mrs. Aylmer. It ran as follows:—

"I am going in the dogcart to Hamslade. Have just ascertained that the pheasants we intended to have for dinner to-day are not forthcoming. Will wire for some to town, and also for peaches. I will leave a line with Kitty Sharston to take the head of the table at breakfast."

"She will be awfully cross about it all," thought Bertha, "and, of course, it is a lie, for there is plenty of game in the larder, and we have an abundant supply of peaches and apricots, but any port in a storm, and cook will not betray me." [Pg 200]

The dogcart was round at the door sharp at nine o'clock, and Bertha, having sent up a twisted bit of paper to Kitty's bed-room, asking her to pour out coffee, started on her way. She reached the station a little before the train came in, and sent the necessary telegrams to the shops in London with which they constantly dealt.

A large party was expected to dine at Aylmer's Court that night, which was Bertha's excuse for ordering the fruit and game. The train was rather late, which added to her impatience. She paced up and down the platform, and when at last Florence's anxious, perturbed face appeared, Bertha was by no means in the best of humours.

"What mad craze is this?" she cried. "You know you cannot possibly come to Aylmer's Court. I came here to prevent it. Now, what is it you want with me?"

"I must speak to you, and at once, Bertha."

"Come into the waiting-room for a moment. You must return by the next train, Florence; you really must. You don't know how terribly annoyed I am, and what risks I run in coming here. The house is full of company, and there is to be a dinner-party to-night. Mrs. Aylmer won't forgive me in a hurry."

While Bertha was talking Florence remained quite silent.

"We must find out the next train to town," continued Bertha.

"I am not going back until you do what I want," said Florence. "I dare not. If you do not choose to have me at Aylmer's Court, I will stay here; but you must do what I want." [Pg 201]

"What is that?"

"I want you to write an essay for me immediately."

"Oh, my dear, what utter folly! Really, when I think of the way in which I have helped you, and the splendid productions which are being palmed off to the world as yours, you might treat me with a little more consideration. My head is addled with all I have to do, and now you come down to ask me to write an essay."

"Listen, Bertha, listen," said poor Florence. She then told her story in as few words as possible.

"I made such a fool of myself. I was very nearly betrayed, but fortunately Mr. Franks and Mr. Anderson took it as a practical joke. I have promised that they shall have an admirable essay by to-morrow evening. You must write it; you must let me have it to take back with me."

"What is the subject?" said Bertha, who was now listening attentively.

"The modern woman and her new crazes. You know you have all that sort of thing at your finger-tips," said Florence, glancing at her companion.

"Oh, yes, I could write about the silly creatures if I had time; but how can I find time to-day? It is not even a story. I have to think the whole subject out and start my argument and—it cannot be done, Florence—that's all."

"But it can, it must be done," replied Florence. "Bertha, I am desperate; all my future depends on this. I have gone wrong again, and you are the cause, and now I will not lose all: I must at least have my little share of this world's goods as my recompense. Oh, I am a miserable girl! You are the evil genius of my life." [Pg 202]

"Don't talk such folly," said Bertha; "do let me think."

They were now both seated in the waiting-room, and Bertha covered her face for a moment with her hands. Florence looked round, she felt hemmed in, and now that she was face to face with Bertha she found that she regarded her with loathing.

Presently Bertha raised her head and glanced at her.

"You must have it to-night?"

"Yes."

"Well, the best thing I can possibly do is to go straight home. I will leave you here; you must on no account let anyone see you—that is all-important. I will try to get to the station this evening and let you have it. I don't know that I can write anything worth reading in the time."

"But at least you will give style and epigram and pure English," said poor Florence, who was sore after the bitter words with which her own production had been received.

"Yes, I shall at least write like a woman of education," said Bertha. "Well, stay here now, and I will, by hook or by crook, come here in time for you to take the last train to town. I suppose it would not do if I posted it?"

"No, it would not; I dare not go back without it. You think I am altogether in your power; but I am desperate, and if you do not let me have that essay to-night I will come to the Court, whoever dines there, and see you. What does it matter to me? Aunt Susan cannot hate me more than she does." [Pg 203]

"You shall have the essay, of course," said Bertha, who turned pale when Florence uttered this threat. "She means it too," thought Miss Keys, as she drove rapidly home. "Oh, what shall I do? Such a world of things to be done, and all those guests expected, and if the fruit or game does not arrive in time (and cook and I dare not now show the stores which we have put away in hiding) what is to be done?"

Bertha entered the house and saw Mrs. Aylmer, who was in just as bad a humour as Bertha had expected to find her in. Everything, she declared, was going wrong. She wished she had not asked those guests to dinner. If there was no game nor proper fruit for dessert, she, Mrs. Aylmer, would be disgraced for life.

Bertha roused herself to be soothing and diplomatic. She brought all her fund of talent and ingenuity to the fore, and presently had arranged things so well that she was able to rush to her desk in Mrs. Aylmer's boudoir and begin to write Florence's essay.

Bertha was a quick writer and had a great deal of genius, as we know, but she was harassed and worried to-day, and for a time the paper which she had promised to give to Florence did not go smoothly. She was in reality much interested in the struggles of the woman who was at that time called "modern." She pitied her; she felt that she belonged to the class. Had she time she would have written with much power, upholding her, commending her, encouraging her to proceed, assuring her that the difficulties which now surrounded her lot would disappear, and that by-and-by those who watched her struggles would sympathise with her more and more. But she had not time to do this. It was much easier to be sarcastic, bitter, crushing. This was her real forte. She determined to write quickly and in her bitterest vein. She was in her element. The paper she was writing would make the modern woman sit up and would make the domestic woman rejoice. It was dead against æstheticism: against all reform with regard to women's education. It was cruel in its pretended lack of knowledge of women's modern needs. [Pg 204]

Bertha felt that she hated her at that moment. She would give vent to her hatred. She would turn the disagreeable, pugnacious, upstart New Woman into ridicule.

If Bertha possessed one weapon which she used with greater power than another it was that of sarcasm. She could be sarcastic to the point of cruelty. Soon her cheeks glowed and her eyes shone: she was in her element. She was writing quickly, for bare life, and she was writing well. The paper would make the New Woman sit up, and would make the old woman rejoice. It would be read eagerly. It was not a kind paper. It was the sort of paper to do harm, not good; but its cleverness was undoubted. She finished it just before the luncheon gong rang, and felt that she had done admirable work.

"After all," she said to herself, "why should I work through the channel of that little imp, Florence Aylmer? Why should she have the fame and glory, and I stay here as a poor companion? Why should I not throw up the thing and start myself as a writer and get praise and money and all the good things which fame and success bring in their train? Why should I not do it?" [Pg 205]

Bertha thought. She held the paper in her hand. It was but to betray Florence and go herself to the editor of the *Argonaut* and explain everything, and the deed was done. But no: she could not do it. She knew better—she was trying for a bigger prize.

"Either I inherit Mrs. Aylmer's wealth or I marry Maurice Trevor and inherit it as his wife," she thought. "I think I see my way. He is depending on me in spite of himself. He will never marry Kitty Sharston. He neither wants her nor she him. He is to be my husband, or, if not, he goes under completely and I secure Mrs. Aylmer's wealth. No amount of writing would give me what I shall get in that way. I can keep Florence quiet with this, and she is welcome, heartily welcome, to the cheap applause."

CHAPTER XXXII. [Pg 206]

TREVOR AND FLORENCE.

It was Bertha's intention to go back to the railway station in the dogcart in order to secure the

pheasants and fruit for the coming party; but just as she was preparing to jump on the cart Mrs. Aylmer herself appeared.

"My dear Bertha," she said, "where are you going?"

Bertha explained.

"That is quite unnecessary. You can send Thomas. I want you to come for a drive with me. I wish to see Mrs. Paton of Paton Manor. I have not yet returned her call. There are also other calls which I want to make. The young people are away enjoying themselves, and our elderly friends have gone shooting. You must come with me, as I cannot possibly go alone."

As Mrs. Aylmer spoke the jingle of bells was heard, and Bertha, raising her eyes, saw the pretty ponies which drew Mrs. Aylmer's own special little carriage trotting down the avenue. Bertha had always to drive Mrs. Aylmer in this little carriage, and, much as she as a rule enjoyed doing so, it was by no means her wish to do so now. She looked at Mrs. Aylmer.

"The cook really does want the things from town."

"That does not matter, my dear. Thomas is driving the dogcart and can call for the things. He had better go straight away at once." [Pg 207]

Mrs. Aylmer gave directions to the man, who whipped up the horse and disappeared down the avenue.

Bertha felt a momentary sense of despair; then her quick wit came to the rescue.

"I quite forgot to give Thomas a message," she said; "he must have it. Excuse me one minute, Mrs. Aylmer."

Before Mrs. Aylmer could prevent her she was running after the dogcart as fast as she could go. She shouted to Thomas, who drew up.

"Yes, miss," he said; "the mare is a bit fresh; what is it?"

"You must take this parcel; there is a young lady waiting for it at the station: see that she gets it. Get one of the porters to put it into her hand. There is no message; just have the parcel delivered to her."

"But what is the name of the young lady, miss?"

Bertha had not thought of that. She looked back again at the house. Mrs. Aylmer was getting impatient, and was waving her hand to her to come back.

"Her name is Miss Florence Aylmer; see that the parcel is put into her hands: there is no message."

Thomas, not greatly caring whom the message was for, promised to see it safely delivered, and the mare, not brooking any further delay, raced down the avenue.

"I do trust things will go right," thought Bertha to herself; "it is extremely dangerous. Florence certainly was mad when she came to this part of the country."

There was no help for it, however. Bertha was learning once more that the way of the transgressors is hard. She had to stifle all her feelings of anxiety, help Mrs. Aylmer into her pretty pony carriage, and take the reins. [Pg 208]

Meanwhile Thomas and the spirited mare went as fast as possible to the railway station. The mare did not like the trains, which were coming and going at this moment in considerable numbers, Hamslade being a large junction. She did not like to stand still with so many huge and terrible monsters rushing by. Thomas did not dare to leave her, so he called to a porter who stood near.

"I have come for some things from town; they must have arrived by the last train. Are there any packages for Mrs. Aylmer of Aylmer's Court?"

"I'll go and see," said the man.

He presently returned with the pheasants and fruit, which had arrived in due course. Thomas saw them deposited in the dogcart, and was just turning the mare's head towards home when he suddenly remembered the parcel. He drew up the animal again almost on its haunches. It reared in a state of fright. What was to be done? The porter had already disappeared into the station, and Thomas knew better than to return home without obeying Bertha's orders. Miss Keys was a power in the establishment. She could dismiss or she could engage just as she pleased. Thomas would not oppose her for worlds. He looked around him, and just at that moment saw Maurice Trevor crossing a field in a leisurely fashion. Maurice drew up when he saw Thomas.

"Hallo," he said, "what are you doing here, Thomas?"

"I came for some parcels from town, sir. I wonder, sir, if you would either hold the mare for a minute or do a commission for Miss Keys?" [Pg 209]

"I will do the commission; what is it?"

"It is not much, sir; it is just to deliver this parcel to a young lady who is waiting for it at the station."

"A young lady who is waiting for it at the station?" said Trevor.

"Yes, sir: Miss Florence Aylmer. There is no answer, sir."

Trevor received the little brown-paper parcel, very neatly made up and addressed to Miss Florence Aylmer, in unbounded astonishment.

Thomas, relieved and feeling that his duty was well done, gave the mare her head and was soon out of sight. Trevor entered the station. He went to the ladies' waiting-room, and there saw Florence Aylmer. She came to the door the moment he appeared.

"What are you doing here?" was his exclamation.

"You may well wonder. But why are you here?"

"I came to give you this." As she spoke he placed the little parcel in Florence's hand.

"Thank you," she said. She had brought a small bag with her; she opened it and dropped the parcel into it. Her face looked worried; it had turned red when she saw Trevor: it was now very white.

He stood leaning up against the door of the waiting-room and contemplated her in astonishment.

"What have you been doing here all day?" he repeated.

"That is my affair," she answered.

"Forgive me; I do not want to be unduly curious, but surely when you were so near you might have come on to the Court. We should all have been glad to see you, and Mrs. Aylmer is your aunt." [Pg 210]

"You must please remember, Mr. Trevor," said Florence, speaking in as stately a tone as she could assume, "that Mrs. Aylmer does not act as my aunt—she does not wish to have anything to do with me."

"But you have been here for hours in this dingy waiting-room."

"No; I took a walk when I thought no one was looking."

"That means you do not wish it to be known that you are here?"

"I do not; and I earnestly beg of you not to mention it. Did Miss Keys really give you the parcel to bring to me?"

"She really did nothing of the kind. She gave it to one of the grooms, who could not leave a spirited mare. He saw me and asked me to deliver it into your hands."

"Thank you," said Florence. She stood silent for a moment; then she looked at the clock.

"I must go," she said; "there is a train back to town immediately, and I want to cross to the other platform."

"I will see you into the train if you will allow me."

Florence could not refuse; but she heartily wished Trevor anywhere else in the world.

"You will be sure not to mention that you saw me here," she said.

"I may speak of it, I suppose, to Miss Keys?"

"I wish you would not."

"I won't promise, Miss Aylmer. I am very uncomfortable regarding the position you are in. It is hateful to me to feel that you should come here like a thief in the night, and stay for hours at the railway station. What mystery is there between you and Miss Keys?" [Pg 211]

Florence was silent.

"You admit that there is a mystery?"

"I admit that there is a secret between us, which I am not going to tell you."

He reddened slightly; then he looked at her. She was holding her head well back; her figure was very upright; there was a proud indignation about her. His heart ached as he watched her.

"I think of you often," he said; "your strange and inexplicable story is a great weight and trouble on my mind."

"I wish you would not think of me: I wish you would forget me."

Florence looked full at him; her angry dark eyes were full of misery.

"Suppose that is impossible?" he said, dropping his voice, and there was something in his tone which made her heart give a sudden bound of absolute gladness. But what right had she to be

glad? She hated herself for the sensation.

Trevor came closer to her side.

"I have very nearly made up my mind," he said; "when it is quite made up I shall come to see you in town. This is your train." He opened the door of a first-class carriage.

"I am going third," said Florence.

Without comment he walked down a few steps of the platform with her. An empty third-class carriage was found; she seated herself in it. [Pg 212]

"Good-bye," he said. He took off his hat and watched the train out of the station; then he returned slowly—very slowly—to Aylmer's Court. He could not quite account for his own sensations. He had meant to go to meet Kitty and her father, who were both going to walk back by the river, but he did not care to see either of them just now.

He was puzzled and very angry with Bertha Keys, more than angry with Mrs. Aylmer, and he had a sore sense of unrest and misery with regard to Florence.

"What can she want with Miss Keys? What can be the secret between them?" he said to himself over and over again. He was far from suspecting the truth.

Bertha returned from her drive in apparently excellent spirits. She entered the hall, to find Trevor standing there alone.

"Why are you back so early?" she said.

He did not speak at all for a moment; then he came closer to her. Before he could utter a word she sprang to a centre table, and took up a copy of the *Argonaut*.

"You are interested in Miss Aylmer. Have you read her story—the first story she has ever published?" she asked.

"No," he replied; "is it there?"

"It is. The reviews are praising it. She will do very well as a writer."

Kitty Sharston and her father appeared at that moment.

"Look, Miss Sharston," exclaimed Trevor; "you know Miss Aylmer. This is her story: have you read it?" [Pg 213]

"I have not," said Kitty; "how interesting! I did not know that the number of the *Argonaut* had come. Florence told me she was writing in it." She took up the number and turned the pages.

"Oh!" she exclaimed once or twice.

Trevor stood near.

Bertha went and warmed herself by the fire.

"Oh!" said Kitty, "this is good." Then she began to laugh. "Only I wish she were not quite so bitter," she exclaimed, a moment later. "It is wonderfully clever. Read it; do read it, Mr. Trevor."

Trevor was all-impatient to do so. He took the magazine when Kitty handed it to him, and began to read rapidly. Soon he was absorbed in the tale. As he proceeded with it an angry flush deepened on his cheeks.

"What is the matter?" said Bertha, who, for reasons of her own, was watching this little scene with interest.

"I don't like the tone of this," he said. "Of course it is clever."

"It is very clever; and what does the tone matter?" said Bertha. "You are one of those painfully priggish people, Mr. Trevor, who will never get on in the world. Have you not yet discovered that being extra good does not pay?"

"I am not extra good; but being good pays in the long run," he answered. He darted an indignant glance at Bertha Keys and left the hall. Scarcely knowing why he did so, he strode into Mrs. Aylmer's boudoir. Bertha's desk, covered with papers, attracted his attention. There was a book lying near which she was reading. He picked it up, and was just turning away when a scrap of thin paper scribbled over in Bertha's well-known hand arrested his eye. Before he meant to do so he found that he had read a sentence on this paper. There was a sharpness and subtlety in the wording of the sentence which puzzled him for a moment, until he was suddenly startled by the resemblance to the style of the story in the *Argonaut* which he had just read. He scarcely connected the two yet, but his heart sank lower in his breast. He thought for a moment; then, opening his pocket-book, he placed the torn scrap of paper in it and went away to his room. It was nearly time to dress for dinner. [Pg 214]

Mrs. Aylmer always expected her adopted son to help her to receive her guests, but Trevor made no attempt to get into his evening suit. His valet knocked at the door, but he dismissed him.

"I don't want your services to-night, Johnson," said the young man.

Johnson withdrew.

"It is all horrible," thought Trevor; "all this wealth and luxury for me and all the roughness for her, poor girl! But why should I think so much about her as I do? Why do I hate that story, clever as it is? The story is not like her. It hurts me to think that she could have written it. It is possible that I"—he started: his heart beat more quickly than was its wont—"is it possible," he repeated softly, under his breath, "that I am beginning to like her too much? Surely not too much! Suppose that is the way out of the difficulty?" He laughed aloud, and there was relief in the sound.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

[Pg 215]

A TETE-A-TETE.

Kitty Sharston, in the softest of white dresses, was playing Trevor's accompaniments at the grand piano. He had a beautiful voice—a very rich tenor. Kitty herself had a sweet and high soprano. The two now sang together. The music proceeded, broken now and then by snatches of conversation. No one was specially listening to the young pair, although some eyes were watching them.

In a distant part of the room Sir John Wallis and Mrs. Aylmer were having a tête-à-tête.

"I like him," said Sir John. "You are lucky in having secured so worthy an heir for your property."

"You don't like him better than I like your adopted child, Miss Sharston," was Mrs. Aylmer's low answer.

"Ay, she is a sweet girl—no one like her in the world," said Sir John. "I almost grudge her to her father, much as I love him. We were comrades on the battle-field, you know. Perhaps he has told you that story."

"I have heard it, but not from him," said Mrs. Aylmer, with a smile. "Your friendship for each other is quite of the David and Jonathan order. And so, my good friend"—she laid her white hand for an instant on Sir John's arm—"you are going to leave your property to your favourite Kitty?"

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Sir John frowned; then he said shortly: "I see no reason for denying the fact. Kitty Sharston, when it pleases God to remove me, will inherit my wealth."

"She is a sweet, very sweet girl," replied Mrs. Aylmer. She glanced down the room; there was significance in her eyes.

Sir John followed her look. Kitty and Trevor had now stopped all music. Trevor was talking in a low tone to the girl; Kitty's head was slightly bent and she was pulling a white chrysanthemum to pieces.

"I wonder what he is saying to her?" thought Mrs. Aylmer. Then all of a sudden she made up her mind. "I should like it," she said aloud; "I should like it much."

Sir John started, and a slight accession of colour came into his ruddy cheeks.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Have you never thought of it? It is right for the young to marry. This would be a match after my own heart. Would it please you?"

"It would, if it were God's will," said Sir John emphatically. He looked again at the pair by the piano, and then across the long room to Colonel Sharston. Colonel Sharston was absorbed in a game of chess with Bertha Keys. He was noticing nothing but the intricacies of the game.

"All the same," added Sir John, "her father and I are in no hurry to see Kitty settled in life. She is most precious to us both; we should scarcely know ourselves without her."

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"Oh, come now, I call that selfish," said Mrs. Aylmer; "a pretty girl must find her true mate, and there is nothing so happy as happy married life."

"Granted, granted," said Sir John.

"You and I, Sir John, are not so young as we used to be. It would be nice for us to see those we love united: to feel that whatever storms life may bring they will bear them together. But say nothing to Colonel Sharston on the subject yet. I am glad to feel that when *my son*, as I always called Maurice, proposes for *your daughter*, as you doubtless think Kitty, there will be no objection on your part."

"None whatever, except that I shall be sorry to lose her. I have a great admiration for Trevor; he is a man quite after my own heart."

Soon afterwards Sir John Wallis moved away.

Mrs. Aylmer, having sown the seed she desired to sow, was satisfied. From time to time the old man watched the pretty, bright-eyed girl. During the rest of the evening Trevor scarcely left her

side; they had much to talk over, much in common. Mrs. Aylmer was in the highest spirits.

"This is exactly what I want," she said to herself; "but I can see, for some extraordinary reason, that notwithstanding his attentions, Maurice has not fallen in love with that remarkably sweet girl. Whom has he given his heart to? If I thought for a single moment that Bertha was playing that game, I should dismiss her with a month's salary. But no: she would not dare. She is a clever woman and invaluable to me, and there is no saying what clever women will not think of; but I do [Pg 218] not believe even Bertha would go as far as that, and I warned her too. For some reason Maurice is not often with Bertha just now. Yes, I must bring things to an issue. The Sharstons and Sir John leave on Monday. Maurice must make up his mind to propose to Miss Sharston almost immediately afterwards. He can follow them to Southsea, where they have taken a house for the winter."

Mrs. Aylmer was quite cheerful as she thought over this.

"We will have a grand wedding in the spring," she said to herself, "and Kitty shall come and live with me. I need not keep Bertha Keys when Kitty is always in the house. Kitty would suit me much better. I seldom saw a girl I liked more thoroughly."

Meanwhile Kitty Sharston and her companion, little guessing the thoughts which were passing through the minds of their elders, were busily talking over the one subject which now occupied all Trevor's thoughts. Like bees round a flower, these thoughts drew nearer and nearer every moment to the subject of Florence Aylmer. Whenever Trevor was silent or distrait Kitty would speak of Florence, and his attention was instantly arrested. He began to talk in cheerful and animated tones. Incidents of Florence's life at school always made him laugh. He was glad to hear of her small triumphs, which Kitty related to him with much *naïveté*.

This evening, after a longer pause than usual, during which Kitty tore her chrysanthemum to pieces, and Mrs. Aylmer was quite certain that Maurice was saying something very tender and suitable, Trevor broke the silence by saying abruptly: "You have doubtless all sorts of prizes and [Pg 219] competitions in your school life. Was Miss Aylmer ever remarkable for the excellence of her essays and themes?"

"Ever remarkable for the excellence of her essays or themes?" said Kitty.

Before she could reply, Bertha, whose game was over, and who had just given an emphatic checkmate to her enemy, strolled across the room. She stood near the piano and could overhear the two; Kitty's eyes met hers, and Kitty's cheeks turned pale.

"I don't think she was specially remarkable for the excellence of her writing," said Kitty then, in a low voice.

"You surprise me. Such talent as she now possesses must have been more or less inherent in her even as a child."

"It does not always follow," said Bertha, suddenly joining in the conversation. "I presume you are both talking of your favourite heroine, Florence Aylmer. But you remember an occasion, however, Miss Sharston, when Florence Aylmer *did* receive much applause for a carefully-worded essay."

"I do," said Kitty; "how dare you speak of it?" She rose to her feet in ungovernable excitement, her eyes blazed, her cheeks were full of colour.

Another instant and she might have blurted out all the truth, and ruined Bertha for ever, had not that young lady laid her hand on her arm.

"Hush!" she whispered; "be careful what you say. Remember you injure her. Mr. Trevor, I think I see Mrs. Aylmer beckoning to you."

Mrs. Aylmer was doing nothing of the kind; but Trevor was obliged to go to her. Kitty soon [Pg 220] subsided on her seat.

"Why did you say that?" she said.

"Can you not guess? I wanted to save the situation. Why should poor Florence be suspected of having written badly when she was young? It is much more natural for you, who are her true friend, to uphold her and to allow people to think that the great talent which she now possesses was always in evidence. I spoke no less than the truth. That essay of hers was much commented on and loudly applauded."

"Oh, you know you have told a lie—the worst sort of lie," said Kitty. "Oh, what am I to say? Sometimes I hate you."

"I know you hate me, but you have no cause to. I am quite on your side."

"I don't understand you; but I will not talk to you any further."

Kitty rose, crossed the room, and sat down by her father.

"She is a very nice girl; far too good to be thrown away on him," thought Bertha to herself. "I admire her as I admire few people. She was always steadfast of purpose and pure of soul, and will be a charming wife for a man who loves her, some day; but she is not for Maurice Trevor. He does not care *that* for her! Yes, I know the old folks are plotting and planning; but all their plots

and plans will come to nothing. There will be a fine *fracas* soon, and I must see, whatever happens, that *my* bread is well buttered."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

[Pg 221]

MAURICE REBELS.

On the morning of the day when the guests were to depart Mrs. Aylmer, having spent a long and almost restless night, sent for Trevor to her room. He entered unwillingly. He had begun to dislike his tête-à-tête with Mrs. Aylmer very much.

"Now, my dear boy, just sit down and let us have a cosy chat," said the old lady.

Trevor stood near the open window.

"The day is so mild," he said, "that it is almost summer. Who would suppose that we were close to December?"

"I have not sent for you, Maurice, to talk of the weather. I have something much more important to say."

"And what is that?" he asked.

"You remember our last conversation in this room?"

He knitted his brows.

"I remember it," he answered.

"I want to carry it on now; we have come to the second chapter."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Our last conversation was introductory. Now the story opens. You have behaved very well, quite as well as I could have expected, during the time that Sharstons and Sir John Wallis have stayed here." [Pg 222]

"I am glad you are pleased with my behaviour; but in reality I did not behave well: I mean according to your lights. I am just as much a rebel as ever."

"Maurice, my dear boy, try not to talk nonsense; try to look a little ahead. How old are you?"

"I shall be six-and-twenty early in the year."

"Quite a boy," said Mrs. Aylmer, in a slightly contemptuous voice. "In ten years you will be six-and-thirty, in twenty six-and-forty. In twenty years from now you will much rejoice over what—what may not be quite to your taste at the present moment, though why it should not be—Maurice, it is impossible, absolutely impossible, that you should not love that sweet and beautiful girl."

"Which girl do you mean?" said Trevor.

"Don't prevaricate; you know perfectly well to whom I allude."

"Miss Sharston? She is far too good, far too sweet to have her name bandied between us. I decline to discuss her."

"You must discuss her. You can do so with all possible respect. Kitty Sharston is to be your wife, Maurice."

"She will never be my wife," he replied. His tone was so firm, he stood so upright as he spoke, his eyes were fixed so sternly, that just for a moment Mrs. Aylmer recognised that she had met her match.

"You refuse to do what I wish?" she said then slowly, "I who have done all for you?" [Pg 223]

"I refuse to do this. This is the final straw of all. No wealth is worth having at the price you offer. I will only marry the woman I love. I respect, I admire, I reverence Miss Sharston; but I do not love her, nor does she love me. It is sacrilege to talk of a marriage between us. If I offered she would refuse; it is not to be thought of; besides—"

"Why do you stop? Go on. It is just like your gratitude. How true are the poet's words: 'Sharper than serpent's tooth!' But what is your intention in the future?"

"Justice," he replied. "I cannot bear this. It troubles me more than I can say. If you will not reinstate the girl who ought to be your heiress in her right position, I at least will do what I can for her. I will offer her all I have."

"You! you!" Mrs. Aylmer now indeed turned pale. She rose from her seat and came a step nearer the young man.

"You are mad; you must be mad," she said. "What does this mean?"

"It means that I intend to propose for Florence Aylmer. Whether she will accept me or not God only knows, but I love her."

"You told me a short time ago that you were not her lover."

"I had not then looked into my own heart. Now I find that I care for no one else. Her image fills my mind day and night; I am unhappy about her—too unhappy to endure this state of things any longer."

"Do you think she will take you, a penniless man? Do you think you are a good match for her or for any girl?" [Pg 224]

"That has nothing to do with it. If she loves me she will accept all that I can give her, and I can work for my living."

"I will not listen to another word of this. You have pained me inexpressibly."

"You gave me time to decide, and I have decided. If you will forgive Miss Aylmer whatever she happened to do to displease you, if you will make her joint heiress with me in your estates, then we will both serve you and love you most faithfully and most truly; but if you will not give her back her true position I at least will offer her all that a man can offer—his heart, his worship, and all the talent he possesses. I can work for my wife, and before God I shall be fifty times happier than in my present position."

Mrs. Aylmer pointed to the door.

"I will not speak to you any more," she said. "This is disastrous, disgraceful! Go! Leave my presence!"

CHAPTER XXXV. [Pg 225]

THE ESSAY AROUSES CRITICISM.

Thomas Franks was much relieved when, on the morning after her return to town, Florence sent him the paper which Bertha had written. Florence herself took the precaution to carefully copy it out. As she did so, she could scarcely read the words; there were burning spots on her cheeks, and her head ached terribly.

Having completed her task, she sent it off by post, and Tom Franks, in good time, received Bertha's work. He read it over at first with some slight trepidation, then with smiling eyes and a heart beating high with satisfaction. He took it immediately to his chief.

"Ah! this is all right," he said; "read it: you will be pleased. It quite fulfills the early promise."

Mr. Anderson did glance rapidly over Bertha's paper.

"Miss Florence Aylmer has done good work," he said, when he had finished reading her pungent and caustic words; "and yet—" A thoughtful expression crossed his face, he was silent for a moment, then he looked up at the young man, who was standing near.

"I doubt if in any way such a paper will help our new production," he said. "It is difficult for me to believe that any girl could write in what I will call so agnostic a spirit. There is a bitterness, a want of belief, an absence of all feeling in this production. I admit its cleverness; but I should be sorry to know much of the woman who has written it." [Pg 226]

"I admire talent in any form," said Tom Franks; "it will be inserted, of course. People who want smart things will like it, I am sure. Believe me, you are mistaken; it will do good, not harm."

"It may do good from a financial point of view: doubtless it will," said Mr. Anderson; "but I wish the girl who has those great abilities would turn them to a higher form of expression. She might do great things then, and move the world in a right way."

"I grant you that the whole thing is pessimistic," said Franks; "but its cleverness redeems it. It will call attention, and the next story by Miss Aylmer which appears in the *Argonaut* will be more appreciated than her last."

"See that that story appears in the next number," said his chief to Franks, and the young man left the room.

Florence received in due time a proof of her paper for correction. There was little alteration, however, needed in Bertha's masterly essay; but Florence was now obliged to read it carefully, and her heart stood still once or twice as she read the expressions which she herself was supposed to have given birth to. She had just finished correcting the proofs when Edith Franks came into the room.

"I have just seen Tom," she said; "he is delighted with your essay. Is that it? Have you corrected it? May I look through it?"

"I would much rather you did not read it, Edith." [Pg 227]

"What nonsense! It is to be published, and I shall see it then."

"Well, read it, if you must, when it is in the paper; only I would rather you didn't read it at all."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't like it."

"Why do you write what you don't like?" said Edith, fixing her sharp eyes on her new friend's face.

"One does all sorts of things perhaps without reason; one writes as one is impelled," said Florence.

Edith went up to her, and after a brief argument possessed herself of the long slip of proof she was holding in her hand.

"I am going to read it now," she said; "I always said you were neurotic: even your talents tend in that direction. Oh, good gracious! what an extraordinary opening sentence! You are a queer girl!"

Edith read on to the end. She then handed the paper back to Florence.

"What do you think of it?" said Florence, noticing that she was silent.

"I hate it."

"I thought you would. Oh. Edith, I am glad!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Because I so cordially hate it too."

"I would not publish it if I were in your place," said Edith; "it may do harm. It is against the woman who is struggling so bravely. It turns her noblest feelings into ridicule. Why do you write such things, Florence?"

"One cannot help one's self; you know that," replied Florence. [Pg 228]

"Rubbish! One can always help doing wrong. You have been queer all through. I cannot pretend to understand you. But there, as Tom admires it so much, I suppose it must go into the paper. Will you put it into an envelope, and I will post it?"

Florence did so. She directed the envelope to the editor, and Edith took it out with her.

As she was leaving the room, she turned to Florence and said: "Try and make your next thing more healthy. I hope to goodness very few people will read this; it is bad from first to last."

She ran downstairs. Just as she was about to drop the little packet into the pillar-box, she glanced at her watch.

"I shall have time to go and see Tom. I don't like this thing," she said to herself. "Miss Aylmer ought not to write what will do direct harm. The person who has written this paper might well not believe in any God. I don't like it. It ought not to be published. I will speak to Tom about it. Some of the worst passages might at least be altered or expunged."

Edith hailed a hansom, was taken Citywards, and found herself in her brother's own private room shortly before he was finishing for the day.

"Here is the work of your precious protégée," she said, flinging the manuscript on Tom's desk. He took it up.

"Has she corrected it? That's right; I want to send it to the printer. By the way, Edith, have you read it?"

"I grieve to say I have."

Tom Franks looked at her in a puzzled way.

"Why do you speak in that tone?" [Pg 229]

"Because it is so horrible and so false, Tom. Why do you publish it?"

"You agree with Mr. Anderson; he doesn't like it either."

"Don't send it to the printers like that. Poor Florence must be a little mad. Cut out some of the passages. Give it to me, and I'll show you. This one, for instance, and this."

Tom Franks took the paper from her.

"It goes in entire, or it does not go in at all," he said; "its cleverness will carry the day. I must speak to Miss Aylmer. She must not give vent to her true feelings; in future, she must put a check on them."

"She must have a terrible mind," said Edith. "If I had known it, I don't think I could have made her my friend."

"Oh, don't give her up now," said Tom; "poor girl, she is to be pitied."

"Of course she is; great talent like hers often means a tendency to insanity. I must watch her; she is a curious and interesting study."

"She is monstrously clever," said Tom Franks; "I admire her very much."

Edith, feeling that she had done no good, left the office.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

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A LETTER FROM HOME.

In due time the first number of the new weekly paper appeared, and Florence's article was on the leading page. It created, as Tom Franks knew it would, a good deal of criticism. It met with a shower of abuse from one party, and warm notices, full of congratulation, from another. It certainly increased the sale of the paper and made people look eagerly forward to the next work of the rising star.

Florence, who would not glance at the paper once it had appeared, and who did her utmost to forget Bertha's work, tried to believe that she was happy. She had now really as much money as she needed to spend, and was able to send her mother cheques.

Mrs. Aylmer was in the seventh heaven of bliss. As to Sukey, she was perfectly sick of hearing of Miss Florence's talents and Miss Florence's success. Mrs. Aylmer the less thought it high time to write a congratulatory letter to her daughter.

> "My dear Flo," she wrote, "you are the talk of the place. I never knew anything like it. I am invaded by visitors. I am leading quite a picnic life, hardly ever having a meal at home, and with your cheques I am able to dress myself properly. Sukey also enjoys the change. But why, my dear love, don't you send copies of that [Pg 231] wonderful magazine, and that extraordinary review, to your loving mother? I have just suggested to a whole number of your admirers to meet me at this house on Wednesday next, when I propose to read aloud to them either your article in the *General Review* or one of your stories in the *Argonaut*. Do send me the copies, dear; I have failed hitherto to get them."

At this point in her letter Mrs. Aylmer broke off abruptly. There had come a great blot of ink on the paper, as if her pen had suddenly fallen from her hand. Later on the letter was continued, but in a different tone.

> "Our clergyman, Mr. Walker, has just been to see me. What do you think he has come about? He brought your paper with him and read passages of it aloud. He said that it was my duty immediately to see you, and to do my utmost to get you into a better frame of mind.
>
> "He says your style—I am quoting his exact words—and your sentiments are bitterly wrong, and will do a lot of mischief. My dear girl, what does this mean? Just when your poor, doting old mother was so full of bliss and so proud of you, to give her a knock-down blow of this sort! I must request you, my precious child, the next time you write for the *General Review*, to do a paper which will not cause such remarks as I have just listened to from the lips of our good clergyman. You might write, Florence, a nice little essay on the sins of ambition, or something of that sort—or what do you say to a paper on flowers, spring flowers?—I think that would be so sweet and poetic—or the sad sea waves? I really did not know that I [Pg 232] had such a clever brain myself. You must have inherited your talent from me, darling. Now, do write a paper on the sad sea waves. I know I shall cry over it. I feel it beforehand. Don't forget, my love, the lessons your poor mother has tried to teach you. Mr. Walker spoke so severely that I almost thought I ought to return your nice cheque for five pounds; but on reflection, it seemed to me that that would do no good, and that I at least knew how to spend the money well. I told him I would give him ten shillings out of it for the missionary society. He seemed quite shocked. How narrow-minded some clergymen are! But there, Flo, don't forget that the next paper is to be on spring flowers or the sad sea waves. It will take like wildfire.
>
> "Your Affectionate Mother."

This letter was received by Florence on the following morning. She was seated at her desk, carefully copying the last production sent to her by Bertha Keys. It was not an essay this time, but a story, and was couched in rather milder terms than her two previous stories. Florence thrust it into a drawer, read her mother's letter from end to end, and then, covering her face with her hands, sat for a long time motionless.

"I am successful; but it seems to me I am casting away my own soul," she said to herself. "I am not happy. I never thought, when I could supply mother with as much money as she needed,

when my own affairs were going on so nicely, when my independence was so far secured, and when I was on a certain pinnacle of success, that I could feel as I do. But nothing gives me pleasure. Even last night, at that party which the Franks took me to, when people came up and congratulated me, I felt stupid and heavy. I could not answer when I was spoken to, nor carry on arguments. I felt like a fool, and I know I acted as one; and if Mr. Franks had not been so kind, I doubt not I should have openly disgraced myself. Oh, dear! the way of transgressors is *very* hard, and I hate Bertha more than words can say." [Pg 233]

Florence was interrupted at this pause in her meditations by a tap at her door. She was now able to have two rooms at her command in Prince's Mansions, and Franks, who had come to see her, was ushered into a neatly-furnished but simple-looking sitting-room.

Florence rose to meet him.

"Are you well?" he said, staring at her.

"Why do you ask? I am perfectly well," she replied, in a tone of some annoyance.

"I beg your pardon; you look so black under the eyes. Do you work too hard at night?"

"I never work too hard, Mr. Franks; you are absolutely mistaken in me."

"I am glad to hear it. Is your next story ready?"

"I am finishing it."

"May I see it?"

"No, I cannot show it to you. You shall have it by to-morrow or next day at latest."

"Do you feel inclined to do some more essays for our paper?"

"I would rather not," said Florence.

"But why so?" [Pg 234]

"You didn't like my last paper, you know."

"Oh, I admired it for its cleverness. I didn't care for the tone. It is unnecessary to give way to all one's feelings. When you have written more and oftener, you will have learned the art of suppression."

"I have just had a letter from mother," said Florence; "I will show you her postscript. You will see that, although she was proud of me, it was the pride of ignorance. This is what our clergyman, Mr. Walker, says, and he is right."

Franks read the few words of the postscript.

"I suppose he is right," he answered. He looked full at the girl and half-smiled.

"It would be extremely successful if you would do a paper in a *totally* different tone," he said; "could you not try?"

"I cannot give what is not in me."

"Well, have a good try. Choose your own subject. Let me have the very best you can. I must not stay any longer now. The story at least will reach me in good time?"

"Yes, and I think you will like it rather better than the last. Good-bye," said Florence.

He held her hand lingeringly for a moment, and looked into her face. As he went downstairs he thought a good deal about her. She interested him. If he married, he would as soon have clever and original Florence Aylmer for his wife as any other woman he had ever met.

He was just leaving the house when he came face to face with Trevor. Maurice was hurrying into the house as Franks was going out. The sub-editor of the *Argonaut* started when he saw Trevor. [Pg 235]

"Hallo," he said, "who would have thought to see you here? How are you?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"I imagined you to be in the country safe with that kind old lady who is feathering your nest."

"I don't think that will come off, Franks; but I do not feel inclined to discuss it. I have come up to town to see Miss Aylmer. How is she?"

"Quite well, or, rather, no: I don't think she is very well. I have just seen her. What a wonderfully clever girl she is!"

"So it seems," said Trevor, in a somewhat impatient tone. "Is she in?"

"Yes; I have just come from her."

"Then I won't detain you now." Trevor ran upstairs, and Franks went quickly back to his office.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

[Pg 236]

TREVOR PROPOSES TO FLORENCE.

Trevor's vigorous knock came upon Florence's door. She did not know why her heart leapt, nor why the colour came into her cheeks. She had been feeling indifferent to all the world a moment before. Now she was suddenly eager and full of interest.

She crossed the room and opened the door wide. When she saw Trevor she uttered an exclamation and her eyes shone.

"Is it possible that you have come?" she said. "How are you? Won't you come in?"

He took her hand.

"Yes, I have come," he answered. "Can you give me a little time, or are you too busy?"

"I am never busy," said Florence.

He looked at her in some surprise when she said that, but resolved to take no notice. He had quick eyes and a keen intuition, and he saw at a glance that Florence was uneasy and suffering, also that she was more or less indifferent to the life on which she had entered, which ought to have been so full of the keenest interest. She asked him to seat himself and took a chair near.

"How are they all at Aylmer's Court?" she asked.

[Pg 237]

"When I left yesterday morning they were well," he replied. "Did you know that your friend Miss Sharston was on a visit there?"

"Yes, I heard of it; Kitty wrote to me. Do you like Kitty, Mr. Trevor?"

"Of course I like her," he replied, and, remembering what was expected of him by Mrs. Aylmer with regard to Kitty, the bronze on his cheeks deepened.

Florence noticed the increase of colour, and her heart beat.

"I wonder if he does like her and if she likes him. I should not be surprised; I ought to be glad," she thought. But she knew very well that she was not glad, and she vaguely wondered why.

"I have come with a message from my mother," said Trevor, who was watching her while her eyes were travelling towards the fire. He was thinking how ill and worn she looked, and his heart was full of pity as well as love, but he would not speak yet. He must wait; he must be sure of her feelings before he committed himself.

"I have come with a message from my mother," he repeated. "I want you to come back with me now. You enjoyed your last day at the cottage: it was summer then. It is early winter now, but the heath is still beautiful. Shall we go together, and after lunch have a walk on the heath?"

"I am very sorry, but I cannot go," replied Florence. She looked longingly out of the window as she spoke. "No," she repeated; "I cannot."

"But why not? You say you are not busy."

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"In one sense I am not busy; but I have some work to do."

"Some of your literary work?"

Florence nodded, but did not speak.

"I have to copy something," she said, after a pause; "I have to send it to the editor of the *Argonaut*; he is waiting."

"Do you know, I have only read one of your stories, the first which appeared in the *Argonaut*? It was clever."

"I wish it had been idiotic," replied Florence. "Everyone says to me: 'Your story is clever.' I hate that story."

"I am delighted to hear you say so. I did not admire it myself. Of course I saw that it was—"

"Don't say again that it was clever. I don't wish to hear anything about it. I cannot come with you to-day. I have to do some copying."

"Why do you say copying?"

"Because I always copy the manuscripts faithfully before Mr. Franks has them for the *Argonaut*. He is waiting, and I am a slow writer."

"Shall I copy the story for you?"

"Not for all the world," replied Florence, startled at her own vehemence.

Trevor rose, a look of annoyance on his face.

"I am sorry you should think of my offer of help in that spirit," he said; "you don't quite

understand: perhaps some day I may be able to make things plain to you. I take a great, a very great interest in you. You have brought—"

"What?" said Florence.

"You have brought a great anxiety and trouble into my life, as well as a very great absorbing interest; but I can say no more now." [Pg 239]

"If you will go away," said Florence, "I will begin to work. I have a headache, and am confused. Go away and come again, if you like. I shall be better the next time you come."

"Why won't you tell me what is troubling you?"

"How do you know anything troubles me?"

"How do I know?" said Trevor. "I have eyes—that is all: eyes and a certain amount of intuition," he added.

"I cannot go to-day," said Florence, who took no notice of his words, "but perhaps on Sunday I may go to see your mother. Will you be there then?"

"Yes: did you not hear? I have broken with Mrs. Aylmer."

"What?" said Florence. She forgot herself in her excitement. She came two or three steps forward; her hands were clasped tightly together.

"Yes; I cannot stand the life. Mrs. Aylmer is very kind to me, and means well; but so long as she is so cruel to you I cannot endure it. I have told her so, and I am going to earn my own living in the future. I am no longer a rich man—indeed, I am a very poor one; but I have brains and I think I have pluck, and some day I am certain I shall succeed."

Trevor held himself erect, and his eyes, full of suppressed fire, were fixed on Florence's face. He wanted her to say she was glad; he wanted to get a word of sympathy from her. On the contrary, she turned very white, and said, in a low, almost broken voice: "Oh, I am terribly sorry! Why have you done this?" [Pg 240]

"You are *sorry*?"

"Yes, I am."

"I have done it for you. I cannot stand injustice."

"I could never under any circumstances accept Mrs. Aylmer's money," said Florence. "You do me no good, and yourself harm; and then your mother: she was so happy about you. Oh, do go back to Mrs. Aylmer; do tell her you didn't mean it. I know she must be very fond of you. It makes me so wretched, so overpoweringly wretched, to think you should have done this for me. Oh, do go back! She will be so glad to receive you. I know a little about her: I know she will receive you with rejoicing."

"Do you know what she wants me to do?" he said. He was very white now. He had thrown prudence to the winds.

"What?"

"You will not like it when I tell you; but you must at least exonerate me: I am obliged to be frank."

"Say what you please; I am willing to listen."

Trevor dropped once more into a chair.

"When I last saw her she made a proposal to me. It was not the first time; it was the second. She wanted me to marry—"

"I know," said Florence; "she wants you to marry Kitty. But why not? She is so sweet; she is the dearest girl in all the world."

"Hush!" said Trevor. "I do not love her, nor does she love me. I can scarcely bear to tell you all this. It is sacrilegious to think of marriage under such circumstances, and above all things to mention it in connection with a girl like Miss Sharston." [Pg 241]

Florence found tears springing to her eyes.

"You are very good," she said, "too good, to sit here and talk to me. Of course, if you don't love Kitty, there is an end of it. Are you quite sure?"

"Positive. I know my own heart too well. I love another."

"Another?"

Florence had a wild fear for a moment that he was alluding to Bertha Keys. A desperate thought came into her brain.

"At any cost, I will open his eyes: I will tell him the truth," she thought.

Trevor had come nearer, and was bending forward and trying to take her hand.

"You are the one I love," he said. "How can I, who love you with all my heart and soul and strength, who would give my life for you, how can I think of anyone else? It does not matter whether you are the most amiable or the most unamiable woman in the world, Florence: you are the one woman on God's earth for me. Do you hear me, Florence; do you hear me? I love you; I have come to-day to tell you that I give my life to you. I put it into your hands. I didn't mean to speak, but the truth has been wrung from me. Do you hear me, Florence?"

Florence certainly did hear, but she did not speak. Trevor had taken her hand, and she did not withdraw it. She was stunned for a moment. The next instant there came over her, sweeping [Pg 242] round her, entering her heart, filling her whole being, a delicious and marvellous ecstasy. The pain and the trouble vanished. The treachery, the deceit, and the fall she had undergone were forgotten. She only knew that, if Trevor loved her, she loved him. She was about to speak when her eyes fell for a moment on a page of the manuscript she had just written. Like a flash, memory came back.

It stung her cruelly as a serpent might sting. She sprang to her feet; she flung down his hand.

"You don't know whom you are talking to. If you knew me just as I am, you would unsay all those words; and, Mr. Trevor, you can never know me as I am, never, and I can never marry you."

"But do you love me? That is the point," said Trevor.

"I—do not ask me. No—if you must know. How can I love anybody? I am incapable of love. Oh, go, go! do go! I don't love you: of course I don't. Don't think of me again. I am not for you. Try and love Kitty, and make Mrs. Aylmer happy. Go; do leave me! I am unworthy of you, absolutely, utterly."

"But if I think differently?" said Trevor. He was very much troubled by her words; she spoke with such vehemence, and alluded to such extraordinary and to him impossible things, that he failed to understand her; then he said slowly: "You are stunned and surprised, but, darling, I am willing to wait, and my heart is yours. A man cannot take back his heart after he has given it, even though a woman does scorn it. But you won't be cruel to me; I cannot believe it, Florence. I will come again to-morrow and see you." [Pg 243]

He turned without speaking to her again and left the room.

Florence never knew how she spent the rest of that day; but she had a dim memory afterwards that she worked harder during the succeeding hours than she had ever worked in her life before. Her brain was absolutely stimulated by what she had gone through, and she felt almost inclined to venture to write that Sunday-school paper which Tom Franks had so much desired.

She was to go out that evening with the Franks. She was now, although the London season had by no means begun, a little bit in request in certain literary circles; and Tom Franks, who had taken her in tow, was anxious to bring her as much forward as possible.

Edith and Tom were going to drive to a certain house in the suburbs where a literary lady, a Mrs. Simpson, a very fashionable woman, lived. Florence was to be the lioness of the evening, and Edith came in early from her medical work to apprise her of the fact.

"You had better wear that pretty black lace dress, and here are some crimson roses for you," she said. "I bought them at the florist's round the corner; they will suit you very well. But I wish you would not lose all your colour. You certainly look quite fagged out."

"On the contrary, I am not the least bit tired," said Florence. "I am glad I am going. I have finished the story for your brother and can post it first. I have had a hard day's work, Edith, and deserve a little bit of fun to-night."

"Now that I look at you, you don't seem as tired as usual," said Edith; "that is right. Tom was vexed last night. He says you work so hard that you are quite stupid in society. Try and allow [Pg 244] people to draw you out. If you make even one or two of those pretty little epigrammatic speeches with which your writing is full, you will get yourself talked of more than ever. I presume, writing the sort of things you do, that you are going in for fame, and fame alone. Well, my dear, at least so live that you may obtain that for which you are selling yourself."

"I am not selling myself. How dare you?" said Florence. Her whole manner was new; she had ceased to depreciate herself.

Edith left her, and Florence went into her bed-room and carefully made her toilet. Her eyes were soft as well as bright. The dress she wore suited her well; there was a flush of becoming colour in her cheeks. She joined Edith just as Franks drove up in his brougham. He ran upstairs, and was pleased to see that the two girls were ready.

"Come, that is nice," he said, gazing at Florence with an increased beating of his heart. He said to himself: "She is absolutely handsome. She would suit me admirably as a wife. I may propose to her to-night if I have the chance."

He gave his arm to Florence with a certain chivalry which was by no means habitual to him, and the two girls and Franks went downstairs.

"There is to be a bit of a crush," he said, looking at Florence; "and, by the way, did I tell you who was to be present? You saw him to-day: Maurice Trevor. He is a great friend of Mrs. Simpson's, [Pg 245]

and he and his mother have been invited."

Florence's hand was still on Franks's arm when he spoke, and as he uttered the words "Maurice Trevor" she gave that arm an involuntary grip. He felt the grip, and a queer sensation went through him. He could not look into her face, but his suspicions were aroused. Why had she been so startled when Trevor's name was mentioned? He would watch the pair to-night. Trevor was not going to take Florence from him if he, Franks, wished for her: of that he was resolved.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

[Pg 246]

AT THE RECEPTION.

The guests were all interesting, and the room sufficiently large not to be overcrowded. Franks seemed to watch Florence, guarding her against too much intrusion, but at the same time he himself kept her amused. He told her who the people were. As he did so, he watched her face. She still wore that becoming colour, and her eyes were still bright. She had lost that heavy apathetic air which had angered Franks more than once. He noticed, however, that she watched the door, and as fresh arrivals were announced her eyes brightened for an instant, and then grew perceptibly dull. He knew she was watching for Trevor, and he cursed Trevor in his heart.

"She is in love with him. What fools women are!" muttered Franks to himself. "If she married a man like that—a rich man with all that money could give—her literary career would be ended. I have had the pleasure of introducing her to the public; she is my treasure-trove, my one bright particular star. She shall not shine for anyone else. That great gift of hers shall be improved, shall be strengthened, shall be multiplied ten-thousandfold. I will not give her up. I love her just because she is clever: because she is a genius. If she had not that divine fire, she would be as nothing and worse than nothing to me. As it is, the world shall talk of her yet."

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Presently Trevor and his mother arrived, and it seemed to Florence that some kind of wave of sympathy immediately caused his eyes to light upon her in her distant corner. He said a few words to his hostess, watched his mother as she greeted a chance acquaintance, and elbowed his way to her side.

"This is good luck," he said; "I did not expect to see you here to-night." He sat down by her, and Franks was forced to seek entertainment elsewhere.

Florence expected that after the way she had treated Trevor early that day he would be cold and distant; but this was not the case. He seemed to have read her agitation for what it was worth. Something in her eyes must have given him a hint of the truth. He certainly was not angry now. He was sympathetic, and the girl thought, with a great wave of comfort: "He does not like me because I am supposed to be clever. He likes me for quite another reason: just for myself. But why did not he tell me so before—before I fell a second time? It is all hopeless now, of course; and yet is it hopeless? Perhaps Maurice Trevor is the kind of man who would forgive. I wonder!"

She looked up at him as the thought came to her, and his eyes met hers.

"What are you thinking about?" he said. They had been talking a lot of commonplaces; now his voice dropped; if he could, he would have taken her hand. They were as much alone in that crowd as though they had been the only people in the room.

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"What are you thinking of?" he repeated.

"Of you," said Florence.

"Perhaps you are sorry for some of the things you said this morning?"

"I am sorry," she answered gravely, "that I was obliged to say them."

"But why were you obliged?"

"I have a secret; it was because of that secret I was obliged."

"You will tell it to me, won't you?"

"I cannot."

Trevor turned aside. He did not speak at all for a moment.

"I must understand you somehow," he said then; "you are surrounded by mystery, you puzzle me, you pique my curiosity. I am not curious about small things as a rule, but this is not a small thing, and I have a great curiosity as to the state of your heart, as to the state of your—"

"My morals," said Florence slowly; "of my moral nature—you are not sure of me, are you?"

"I am sure that, bad or good—and I know you are not bad—you are the only woman that I care for. May I come and see you to-morrow?"

"Don't talk any more now; you upset me," said Florence.

"May I come and see you to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Remember, if I come, I shall expect you to tell me everything?"

"Yes." [Pg 249]

"You will?"

"I am not certain; I can let you know when you do come."

"Thank you; you have lifted a great weight from my heart."

A moment later Franks appeared with a very learned lady, a Miss Melchister, who asked to be introduced to Florence.

"I have a crow to pluck with you, Miss Aylmer," she said.

"What is that?" asked Florence.

"How dare you give yourself and your sisters away? Do you know that you were very cruel when you wrote that extremely clever paper in the *General Review*?"

"I don't see it," replied Florence. Her answers were lame. Miss Melchister prepared herself for the fray.

"We will discuss the point," she said. "Now, why did you say—"

Trevor lingered near for a minute. He observed that Florence's cheeks had turned pale, and he thought that for such a clever girl she spoke in a rather ignorant way.

"How queer she is!" he said to himself; "but never mind, she will tell me all to-morrow. I shall win her; it will be my delight to guard her, to help her, and if necessary to save her. She is under someone's thumb; but I will find out whose."

His thoughts travelled to Bertha Keys. He remembered that strange time when he met Florence at the railway station at Hamslade. Why had she spent the day there? Why had Bertha sent her a parcel? He felt disturbed, and he wandered into another room. This was the library of the house. [Pg 250] Some papers were lying about. Amongst others was the first number of the *General Review*. With a start Trevor took it up. He would look through Florence's article. That clever paper had been largely criticised already; but, strange to say, he had not read it. He sank into a chair and read it slowly over. As he did so, his heart beat at first loud, then with heavy throbs. A look of pain, perplexity, and weariness came into his eyes. One sentence in particular he read not only once, but twice, three times. It was a strange sentence; it contained in it the germ of a very poisonous thought. In these few words was the possibility of a faith being undermined, and a hope being destroyed. It puzzled him. He had the queer feeling that he had read it before. He repeated it to himself until he knew it by heart. Then he put the paper down, and soon afterwards he went to his mother, and told her he was going home.

"I will send a brougham for you; I am not very well," he said.

She looked into his face, and was distressed at the expression she saw in his eyes.

"All right, Maurice dear; I shall be ready in an hour. I just want to meet a certain old friend, and to talk to that pretty girl Miss Aylmer. I will find out why she does not come to see us."

"Don't worry her. I would rather you didn't," said Trevor.

His mother looked at him again, and her heart sank.

"Is it possible he has proposed for her, and she will not accept him?" thought the mother; and then she drew her proud little head up, and a feeling of indignation filled her heart. If Florence [Pg 251] was going to treat her boy, the very light of her eyes, cruelly, she certainly need expect no mercy from his mother.

CHAPTER XXXIX. [Pg 252]

AN ADMIRABLE ARRANGEMENT.

Trevor took his departure, and the gay throng at Mrs. Simpson's laughed and joked and made merry.

Florence had now worked herself into apparent high spirits. She ceased to care whether she talked rubbish or not. She was no longer silent. Many people asked to be introduced to the rising star, and many people congratulated her. Instead of being modest, and a little stupid and retiring, she now answered back badinage with flippant words of her own. Her cleverness was such an established fact that her utter nonsense was received as wit, and she soon had throngs of men and women round her laughing at her words and privately taking note of them.

Franks all the while stood as a sort of bodyguard. He listened, and his cool judgment never wavered for a moment.

"I must give her a hint," he said to himself; "she requires training. That sort of sparkling, effervescent nonsense is in itself in as bad taste and is as poor as the essay she sent me when she played her great practical joke. She is playing a practical joke now on these people, leading them to believe that her chaff is wit."

He came up to her gravely in a pause in the conversation, and asked her if she would like to go in to supper. She laid her hand on his arm, and they threaded their way through the throng. They did not approach the supper-room, however. Franks led her into a small alcove just beside the greenhouse. [Pg 253]

"Ah," he said, "I have been watching this place; couples have been in it the whole evening: couples making love, couples making arrangements for future work, couples of all sorts, and now this couple, you and I, find ourselves here. We are as alone as if we were on the top of Mont Blanc."

"What a funny simile!" said Florence. She laughed a little uneasily. "I thought," she continued, "you were going to take me in to supper."

"I will presently; I want first to ask you a question, and to say something to you."

"I am all attention," replied Florence.

"There is no use in beating about the bush," said Franks, after a pause. "The thing admits of either 'yes' or 'no.' Miss Aylmer, I take a great interest in you."

"Oh, don't, please," said Florence.

"But I do; I believe I can help you. I believe that you and I together can have a most brilliant career. Shall we work in harness? Shall we become husband and wife? Don't start; don't say no at first. Think it over: it would be an admirable arrangement."

"So it would," said Florence. Her answer came out quietly. She looked full into Franks's cold grey eyes, and burst into a mirthless laugh.

"Why do you look at me like that? Are you in earnest when you admit that it would be an admirable arrangement?" [Pg 254]

"I am absolutely in earnest. Nothing could be more—more—"

"Let me speak. You are not in earnest. It is your good pleasure to take a great many things in life in a joking spirit. Now, for instance, when you sent me that bald, disgraceful, girlish essay, you played a practical joke which a less patient man would never have forgiven. To-night, when you talked that rubbish to that crowd of really clever men and women, you played another practical joke, equally unseemly."

"I am not a society person, Mr. Franks. I cannot talk well in company. You told me to talk, and I did the best I could."

"Your chatter was nearly brainless; the people who listened to you to-night won't put up with that sort of thing much longer. It is impossible with a mind of your order that you should really wish to talk nonsense. But I am not going to scold you. I want to know if you will marry me."

"If I will be your wife?" said Florence. "Why do you wish it?"

"I think it would be a suitable match."

"But do you love me?"

Franks paused when Florence asked him that direct question.

"I admire you very much," he said.

"That has nothing to do with it. Admiration is not enough to marry on. Do you love me?"

"I believe I shall love you." [Pg 255]

"May I ask you a very plain question?"

"What is that?"

"If I were not very clever, if I did not write those smart stories and those clever papers, would you, just for myself, just for my face, and my heart, and my nature, would you desire me as your wife?"

"That is scarcely a fair thing to ask, for I should never have met you had you not been just what you are."

"Well, do you love me?" said Florence again.

"You are a very strange girl. I think on the whole I do love you. I fully expect to love you very much when you are my wife."

"Did you ever love anybody else better than you love me?"

"I didn't expect, Miss Aylmer, to be subjected to this sort of cross-questioning. There was once a girl—" A new note came into Franks's voice, and for the first time those eyes of his were softened.

"She died," he said softly; "you can never be jealous of her: she is in her grave. Had she lived we should have been married long ago. Don't let us talk of her to-night. You and I can have a brilliant career. Will you say 'yes'?"

"I cannot answer you to-night. You must give me time."

"Thank you; that is all I require. I am glad you will think it over. We can be married soon, for I have a good income. I want you to clearly understand that as my wife you continue writing. I want to lead you forth as one of the most brilliant women before the world. I can train you: will you submit to my training?" [Pg 256]

Florence shivered slightly.

"I will let you know to-morrow," she said.

"Come, let us go and have supper," said Franks. He jumped up abruptly, offered Florence his arm, and took her into the supper-room.

The party broke up soon afterwards. Mrs. Trevor had no opportunity of seeing Florence, or, rather, she would not give herself an opportunity.

Mrs. Simpson shook hands with the young literary *débutante* with marked favour. Florence looked prettier than anyone had ever seen her look before. Franks took his sister and Florence home to their flat. As he parted from the latter, he ventured to give her hand a slight squeeze.

"I will call to-morrow morning," he said. "Can I see you before I go to my work?"

"Yes," said Florence; "I shall be at home at"—she paused a moment—"nine o'clock," she said somewhat eagerly.

"What! a rendezvous so early?" exclaimed Edith, with a laugh. Franks laughed also.

"Quite so, Edith," he said; "we are all busy people, and have no time to waste. This is merely a business arrangement between Miss Aylmer and myself."

"All right, Tom; I am sure I'm not going to interfere," said Edith. "Good-night. Come in, Miss Aylmer; it is very cold standing out in the street."

The girls entered the house, and went up to their respective rooms. Fires were burning brightly in each and the doors stood open. [Pg 257]

"You will come into my room and have cocoa, will you not?" said Edith to Florence.

"No, thank you; not to-night."

Edith looked full at her.

"Has Tom proposed to you?" she said suddenly.

"I don't know why you should ask me that question."

"Your face answers me. You will be a fool if you accept him. He is not the man to make any woman happy. Don't tell him that I said it; but he is cold through and through. Only one woman, poor Lucy Leigh, who died before she was twenty, ever touched his heart. What heart he had is in her grave: you will never kindle it into life. Take him if you wish for success, but do not say that I never warned you."

Edith went into her room and slammed the door somewhat noisily behind her. Florence entered hers. The late post had brought a letter—one letter. She started when she saw the postmark, and a premonition of fresh trouble came over her. Then, standing by the fire, she slowly opened the envelope. The contents were as follows:—

"Aylmer's Court, Dec. 3rd.

"My Dear Florence—

"I would come to see you, but am kept here by Mrs. Aylmer's indisposition. She has been seriously unwell and in the doctor's hands since Maurice Trevor left her in the disgraceful fashion he has done. He has nearly broken her heart, but I hope to have the solace of mending it. I wish to say now that from words dropped to Mrs. Aylmer it is highly probable that he has gone to town for the purpose of proposing to you. Accept him, of course, if you wish. It is likely, very likely, that [Pg 258] you will return his affection, for he is an attractive man, and has a warm heart, and also a good one. I have nothing whatever to do with that, but clearly understand the moment the news reaches me that you are betrothed to Maurice Trevor, on that very day I shall tell Mrs. Aylmer the whole truth with regard to the stories which are running in the *Argonaut* and the paper which has already appeared in

the *General Review*. I do not mind whether I go under or not; but you shall be seen in your true colours before ever you become the wife of Maurice Trevor.

"Yours faithfully—and faithful I shall be in that particular—BERTHA KEYS."

CHAPTER XL.

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IS IT "YES" OR "NO"?

Florence sat up long with that letter lying in her lap. The fire burned low and finally went out. Still she sat by the cold hearth, and once or twice she touched the letter, and once or twice she read it.

"It burns into me; it is written in my heart in letters of fire," she said to herself finally, and then she rose slowly and stretched her arms and crossed the room and looked out at the sky. From the top of her lofty flat she could see just a little sky above the London roofs. It was a clear cold night with a touch of frost, and the stars were all brilliant. Florence gazed up at them.

"There is a lofty and pure and grand world somewhere," she said to herself; "but it is not for me. Good-bye, Maurice; I could have loved you well. With you I would have been good, very good: with you I might have climbed up: the stars would not have been quite out of reach. Good-bye, Maurice; it is not to be."

She took Bertha's letter, put it on the cold hearth, set fire to it, and saw it consumed to ashes. Then she undressed and went to bed. Whatever her dreams were she rose in good time in the morning. She had a considerable amount to do. She was to see Franks at nine o'clock. She was to see Trevor later on.

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She had to copy a whole very brilliant story of Bertha's. She was a slow writer and there was nothing of talent in her handwriting.

"I am a very stupid girl when all is said and done," she said to herself; "I am not even in the ordinary sense of the word well-educated. I have been years studying, but somehow I think I must have a frivolous sort of brain. Perhaps I have taken after the little Mummy. The little Mummy never was clever. She is a dear little mother when all is said and done, and very comforting when one is in trouble, and if I saw her now I might break down and fling my arms round her neck and confess to her. With all her silliness she would comfort me and she would never reproach me; but I must not tell. There is no softness in my future. Thank goodness, at least I am young; I may have a great career; I will be satisfied to be famous. It will be terribly, terribly, difficult to be famous through the whim of another woman; but I suppose Bertha will not forsake me."

She dressed, prepared her breakfast as usual, and had just washed up afterwards and put her little sitting-room in order when Franks's knock was heard at her door. He entered in that brisk, business-like, utterly cool way which always characterised him. He looked immaculate and fresh. He was always extremely particular about his appearance. His collars were invariably as white as the driven snow, and his clothes well cut. He dressed himself between the style of a country gentleman and a man of business. He never wore frock-coats, for instance. He was a small man, but well made. He held himself upright as a soldier. His black hair was brushed back from his

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lofty white brow. He had straight black eye-brows and a neat little black moustache and straight features. His skin was of an olive tint. Those well-cut, classical features gave to his face a certain cold sameness of outline. It was almost impossible to surprise him or to cause emotion to visit his countenance. He looked now as composed as though he had merely come to give Florence a fresh order for work.

"Ah," he said, "there you are. One minute past nine; sorry I am late; accept my apologies."

Florence pushed forward a chair. She could scarcely bring herself to speak. Even her lips were white. Franks did not sit; he came a step nearer.

"I have exactly ten minutes," he said; "this is a purely business arrangement. Is it to be 'yes' or 'no?'"

"If you will faithfully assure me that—" began Florence, and then she stopped and wetted her lips. Her mouth was so dry she could scarcely proceed.

Franks gave an impatient start. He took out his watch and glanced at it.

"Yes," he said, "I am awfully sorry; if it is no, it won't be necessary to keep me now."

"I must speak; you cannot hurry me."

"Oh, all right; take your own time," said Franks. His face beamed all over for a moment. He looked at the girl with a certain covetousness. After all, there was something about her which might develop into strength and even beauty. She had been pretty last night. She would assuredly be his stepping-stone to great fame. He was a very clever man himself, but he was not a genius. With Florence, with their two forces combined, might they not rise to any position?

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"Yes, my dear, yes?" he said. "Sit down, Florence, sit down."

She shivered when he called her by her Christian name, but she did drop into a chair. He drew his own close to hers.

"Yes, Florence," he said, "what is it? You are about to make conditions. If they lead to 'yes' I will fulfil them."

"I only want to ask you to repeat something which you said last night."

"What is that?"

"Can you assuredly tell me that you are only marrying me just because you think that you and I together can be famous?"

"You would not like me to say that sort of thing, would you?"

"On the contrary, if I firmly know, firmly and truly from your own lips, that you do *not* love me, that there is no love in the matter, that it is a mere business arrangement——"

"Well, what?"

"It would be, I think, *possible*."

"Then that means 'yes.' I like you very much. I hope a day may come when I shall love you."

"I want it clearly to be understood," said Florence, "that I do not wish for that day. I don't love you at all, and I don't want you to love me; but if we can, as you say, work in harness, perhaps it would be best. Anyhow, I——" [Pg 263]

"You say 'yes,' my dear girl; that is all I need. We can talk over those curious ideas of yours later on. You are engaged to me, Florence—come."

He went quickly up to her, put his arm round her waist, drew her close to him, and kissed her on the forehead.

"I am not repugnant to you, am I?" he said, as she shrank away.

"I don't know," she replied; "I am selling myself and you are buying me: I hope I shall prove a good bargain. I don't want you to imagine for a moment that I care for you; but I am selling myself, and it may be best."

"You must drop all that kind of nonsense when once you are my wife," he said. "As it is, I bear with it. We shall be married before Christmas. We will take a flat in a fashionable part and see literary people. We will start a new salon. Now good-bye; I will call again to-night. By the way, how is the story getting on?"

"I don't know that I can quite finish it all to-day, but you shall have it by the time I promised."

"Thank you, Florence. I believe you and I are acting wisely. I hope we shall be kind to each other: we have a great deal in common. You could not step up as high as I shall place you without my aid, and you are useful to me: it is an admirable arrangement. Good-bye, dear."

She shrank so far away that he did not venture to repeat his cold caress. He again looked at his watch.

"How late I shall be!" he said. "Anderson will be astonished. He will forgive me, however, when I tell him that I am engaged to my rising star. Good-bye, Florence."

"Thank God!" she muttered, when the door closed behind him. She had scarcely time, however, [Pg 264] for reflection before it was opened again, and this time without knocking. Edith Franks, wearing her hat and coat and buttoning on her gloves, entered briskly.

"I thought I heard Tom going downstairs. So he has been?" she enquired.

"Yes, Edith, he has been."

Edith came nearer and looked at Florence's face.

"So you are to be my sister-in-law," she said.

"Don't scold me, please, Edith."

"Good gracious, no dear; I gave you my word of warning last night. Now I am all congratulations. You will make a nice little sister-in-law, and we are proud of your ability. Go on and prosper. You have chosen ambition. Some women would prefer love, but everyone to their taste. I'm off. Good-bye, Florence. I see you would much rather not be kissed. Tom has been doing that, doubtless. I will see you again this evening."

Edith went out of the room in her brisk way. She shut the door quickly.

Florence went straight to the window. She stood there for a minute or two looking out. Then she dropped into a chair and, taking a sheet of note-paper, began to write. She was writing to Bertha.

"My Dear Bertha—

"The letter I received from you last night requires no comment. You may perhaps be glad to hear that I have just engaged myself to Mr. Franks, the sub-editor of the *Argonaut*, and a very distinguished man. We are to be married before Christmas. It is his particular wish that I should go on writing, and it is one of the conditions that we shall both pursue our own careers independently of the other, and yet each helped by the other. You will, I am sure, fulfil your part of the bargain. I shall want another story of about five thousand words next week, as terse, and brilliant, and clever as you can make it. I shall also want an article for the *General Review*. Make it smart, but avoid the woman question. I have been bullied on the subject, and did not know how to answer. [Pg 265]

"Yours truly,

"FLORENCE AYLMER."

This letter written, Florence did not even wait to read it. She put it into an envelope, directed it, and ran out with it to the nearest pillar-box. She dropped it in and returned to the house. It was not yet eleven o'clock. How tired she was! It was nearly two hours since Franks and she had ratified their contract. She was engaged now—engaged to a man who did not profess to love her, for whom she did not feel the faintest glimmering of affection. She was engaged and safe; yes, of course she was safe. No fear now of her ghastly secret being discovered! As long as Bertha lived the stories could be conveyed to her, and the stories would mean fame, and she would go on adding fame to fame and greatness to greatness until she was known, not only in England, but in America, and in the Colonies, as a new writer of great promise, and Franks would be rich. Oh, yes, he would manage her financial affairs in the future. He would not allow her to sell her talent for less than it was worth. He would instruct her how to dress, and how to speak when she was in public; he would take care that she did not give herself away as she had all but done last night. [Pg 266] He would be her master, and doubtless she would find herself ruled by an iron rod. But no matter: she was safe. She would not think even for a moment of what she was throwing away. Such was her feeling; but never mind: she had chosen the wrong and refused the right. Great temptation had come, and she had not been able to resist it, and now the only way was to go straight on; and Franks had made that way plain. It was the broad road which led to destruction. She was pricked by many thorns, and the broad road was the reverse of pleasant, and she saw dizzily how steep the hill would grow by-and-by, and how fast the descent would be; but never mind: she at least was safe for the present.

She panted and felt herself turning slightly cold as this last thought came to her, for there was a tap at the door, and Trevor, his face white, his grey eyes anxious, an expression of earnestness and love beaming all over his features, came in.

He was in every way the opposite of Tom Franks.

Florence looked wildly at him. She must go through the dreadful half-hour which was before her. She hoped he would not stay long: that he would take his dismissal quietly. She dared not think too hard; she did her utmost to drive thought out.

"Well," said Trevor, "have I come too early?"

"Oh, no," said Florence, "it is past eleven," and she looked listlessly at the clock.

He tried to take her hand. She put it immediately behind her. [Pg 267]

"You have come to ask me a question, have you not?" she said.

"I have. You promised me your confidence last night."

"I did not promise: I said I might give it."

"Am I to expect it?"

"What do you want to know?"

"I want to know this," said Trevor. He took out of his pocket a copy of the *General Review*. He opened it at the page where Florence's article appeared. He then also produced from his pocket-book a tiny slip of paper, a torn slip, on which, in Bertha Keys's handwriting, was the identical sentence which had attracted so much attention in the *Review*.

"Look," he said.

Florence did look. Her frightened eyes were fixed upon the scrap of paper.

"Where—where did you get that?" she said.

"It is remarkable," he said; "I thought perhaps *you* would explain. I have read your paper—I am not going to say whether I like it or not. Do you remember that day when I saw you and gave you a packet at Hamslade Station?"

"Quite well."

"I think you would not be likely to forget. I was naturally puzzled to find you so near Mrs. Aylmer's house and yet not there. The packet I gave you was from Miss Keys, was it not?"

"There can be no harm in admitting that fact," replied Florence, in a guarded voice.

He looked at her and shook himself impatiently. [Pg 268]

"I was perplexed and amazed at seeing you at the station."

"You ought to try and curb your curiosity, Mr. Trevor," said Florence. She tried to speak lightly and in a bantering tone. He was too much in earnest to take any notice of her tone.

"I was curious; I had reason to be," he replied. "I went home. Miss Keys, Miss Sharston and others were in the hall. They were talking about you, and Miss Sharston showed me one of your stories. I read it; we both read it, and with keen curiosity."

"Was it the first or the second?" said Florence.

"The first story. It was clever; it was not a bit the sort of story I thought you would have written."

Florence lowered her eyes.

"The style was remarkable and distinctive," he continued; "it was not the style of a girl so young as you are; but of course that goes for nothing. I went upstairs to Mrs. Aylmer's boudoir: I wanted to fetch a book. I don't think I was anxious to read, but I was restless. The book lay on Miss Keys's desk. On the desk also were some torn sheets of paper. I picked up one mechanically."

"You read what was not meant for you to read!" said Florence, her eyes flashing.

Trevor gave her a steady glance.

"I admit that I read a sentence—the sentence I have just shown you. I will frankly tell you that I was surprised at it; I was puzzled by the resemblance between the style of the story and the style of the sentence. I put the torn sheet of paper into my pocket-book. I don't exactly know why I did it at the time, but I felt desperate. I was taking a great interest in you. It seemed to me that if you [Pg 269] did wrong I was doing wrong myself. It seemed to me that if by any chance your soul was smirched, or made unhappy, or blackened, or any of its loftiness and its god-like quality removed, my own soul was smirched too, my own nature lowered. But I thought no special harm of you, although I was troubled; and that night I learned for the first time that I was interested in you because I loved you, because you were the first of all women to me, and I——"

"Oh, don't," said Florence, "don't say any more." She turned away from him, flung herself on the sofa, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

Trevor stood near for a little in much bewilderment. Presently she raised her eyes. He sat down on the sofa by her.

"Why don't you tell me everything, Florence?" he said, with great tenderness in his tone.

"I cannot: it is too late. Think what you like of me! Suspect me as you will! I do not think you would voluntarily injure me. I cannot give you my confidence, for I——"

"Yes, dear, yes; don't tremble so. Poor little girl, you will be better afterwards. I won't ask you too much; only tell me, sweetest, with your own lips that you love me."

"I am not sweet, I am not dear, I am not darling. I am a bad girl, bad in every way," said Florence. "Think of me as you like. I dare not be near you: I dare not speak to you. Oh, yes, perhaps I *could* have loved you: I won't think of that now. I am engaged to another man." [Pg 270]

"You engaged!" said Trevor. He sprang to his feet as if someone had shot him. He trembled a little; then he pulled himself together. "Say it again."

"I am engaged to Mr. Franks."

"But you were not engaged last night?"

"No."

"When did this take place?"

"Two hours ago; he came at nine—a minute past, I think. We became engaged; it is all settled. Good-bye; forget me."

Florence still kept her hands behind her. She rose: her miserable tear-stained face and her eyes full of agony were raised for a moment to Trevor's.

"Do go," she said; "it is all over. I have accepted the part that is not good, and you must forget me."

CHAPTER XLI. [Pg 271]

THE LITTLE MUMMY IN LONDON.

Two days later a little woman might have been seen paying a cabman at the door of No. 12, Prince's Mansions. She argued with him over the fare, but finally yielded to his terms, and then

she tripped upstairs, throwing back her long widow's veil, which she always insisted on wearing. She reached the door which had been indicated to her as the one leading to Florence's room. She tapped, but there was no answer. She tried to turn the handle: the door was locked. Just as she was so engaged, a girl with a bright, keen face and resolute manner opened the next door and popped out her head.

"Pardon me," said Mrs. Aylmer the less, for of course it was she, "but can you tell me if my daughter Florence is likely to be in soon?"

"Your daughter Florence?" repeated the girl. "Are you Mrs. Aylmer—Florence's mother?"

"That is my proud position, my dear. I am the mother of that extremely gifted girl."

"She is out, but I daresay she will be in soon," said Edith Franks. "Will you come into my room and wait for her?"

"With pleasure. How very kind of you!" said Mrs. Aylmer. She tripped into the room, accepted the seat which Edith pointed out to her near the fire, and untied her bonnet strings. [Pg 272]

"Dear, dear!" she said, as she looked around her. "Very comfortable indeed. And is *this* what indicates the extreme poverty of those lady girls who toil?"

"That is a remarkable sentence," said Edith. "Do you mind saying it again?"

Mrs. Aylmer looked at her and smiled.

"I won't say it again," she said, "for it does not fit the circumstance. You do not toil."

"But indeed I do; I work extremely hard—often eight or nine hours a day."

"Good gracious! How crushing! But you don't look bad."

"I have no intention of being bad, for I enjoy my work. I am studying to be a lady doctor."

"Oh, don't," said Mrs. Aylmer. She immediately drew down her veil and seated herself in such a position that the light should not fall on her face.

"I have heard of those awful medical women," she said, after a pause, "and I assure you the mere idea of them makes me ill. I hope they will never become the fashion. You expect medical knowledge in a man, but not in a woman. My dear, pray don't stare at me; you may discover that I have some secret disease which I do not know of myself. I do not wish it found out even if it exists. Please keep your eyes off me."

"I am not going to diagnose your case, if that is what you mean," replied Edith, with a smile. "I am by no means qualified: I have to pass my exams in America."

"Thank you." Mrs. Aylmer sighed again. "It is a relief to know that at present you understand but little of the subject. I hope some good man may marry you and prevent your becoming that monster—a woman doctor. But now to change the subject. I am extremely anxious for my daughter to return. I have bad news for her. Can you tell me how she is?" [Pg 273]

"Well, I think," replied Edith.

"You know her."

"Oh, yes, rather intimately. Have you not heard our news?"

"What news?"

"She is engaged to my brother."

"What?" cried Mrs. Aylmer. She sprang to her feet; she forgot in her excitement all fear of the embryo medical woman. She dropped her cloak and rushed forward to where Edith was standing and seized both her hands.

"My girl engaged to your brother! And pray who is your brother?"

"A very rising journalist, a remarkably clever man. It is, let me tell you, Mrs. Aylmer, an excellent match for your daughter."

"Oh, that remains to be seen. I don't at all know that I countenance the engagement."

"I am afraid you cannot help it now. Florence is of age. I wonder she did not write to you."

"I may not have received her letter. The fact is I have been away from home for the last day or two. But I wish she would return, as I have come on most urgent business. Pray, miss—I do not even know your name."

"Franks," replied Edith: "Edith Franks."

"Pray, Miss Franks, do not spread the story of my daughter's engagement to your brother just for a day or two. Circumstances may alter matters, and until a girl has been really *led* to the altar I never consider this sort of thing final. Ah! whose step is that on the stairs? I believe it is my Flo's." [Pg 274]

Mrs. Aylmer tripped to the door, flung it open, and stood in an expectant attitude.

The next moment Florence, accompanied by Tom Franks, appeared. Mrs. Aylmer looked at him, and in a flash said, under her breath: "The future son-in-law." Then she went up to Florence and kissed her.

"Oh, mother," said Florence, looking by no means elated at this unexpected appearance of the little Mummy on the scene, "what has brought you to town?"

"Most important business, dear. I must see you immediately in your room. I assure you nothing would induce me to spend the money I did were it not absolutely necessary that I should see you at once. This gentleman, you must tell him to go, Florence; I have not a single moment to waste over him now."

"Let me introduce Mr. Franks to you, mother. Tom, this is my mother. You know, mother, that I am engaged to Mr. Franks."

"I know nothing of the kind," replied Mrs. Aylmer angrily.

Florence smiled.

"But I wrote to you, mother; I told you everything."

"Perhaps so, dear, but I didn't receive the letter. I cannot acknowledge the engagement just now. I am very much agitated. Mr. Franks, you will, I hope, excuse me. Of course I know the feelings of all young men under such circumstances, and I wish to do nothing rude or in any way impolite, but just now I *must* see my daughter alone." [Pg 275]

"You had better go, Tom," said Florence. She took the key of her room out of her pocket, opened the door, and ushered her mother in.

"Now, mother," she said. "Oh, dear, the fire is out." She walked to the hearth, stooped down, and began to light the fire afresh. Mrs. Aylmer sat near the window.

"Now, mother," said Florence, just looking round her, "what have you come about?"

"I thought you would give me a welcome," said Mrs. Aylmer the less; "you used to be an affectionate girl."

"Oh, used!" said Florence. "But people change as they grow older. Sometimes I think I have not any heart."

"But you have engaged yourself to that man. I presume you love him."

"No, I don't love him at all."

"Flo, it is impious to hear your talk; it is just on a par with those awfully clever papers of yours—those stories and those articles. You have made a terrible sensation at Dawlish. You are becoming notorious, my dear. It is awful for a little widow like me to have a notorious daughter. You must stop it, Flo; you really must!"

"Come, mother, I will get you a cup of tea. What does it matter what the Dawlish people say? You will spend the night, of course?"

"You and I, my dear, will spend some of the night in the train."

"Now, mother, what does this mean?" [Pg 276]

"Listen, Flo. Yes, you may get me a cup of tea and a new-laid egg, if you have such a thing."

"But I have not."

"Then a rasher of bacon done to a turn and a little bit of toast. I can toast the bread myself. You are not at all badly off in this nice room, but——"

"Go on, mother, go on; do explain why you have come."

"It is your aunt, dear; she is very ill indeed. She is not expected to recover."

"What, Aunt Susan?"

"Yes, she has had a serious illness and has taken a turn for the worse. It is double pneumonia, whatever that means. Anyhow, it is frightfully fatal, and the doctors have no hope. I went to see her."

"When you heard she was ill, mother?"

"No, I didn't hear she was ill. I felt so desperate about you and the extraordinary sentiments you were casting wholesale upon the world that I could stand it no longer, and when you sent me that last cheque I thought I would make a final appeal to Susan. So I put on my very best black silk ——"

Florence now with a quick sigh resumed her duties as tea-maker. Mrs. Aylmer was fairly launched on her narrative.

"I put on my very best black silk—the one that nice, charming, *clever* Miss Keys sent to me—and I told Sukey that I should be away for a couple of days and that she was to expect me when she

heard from me, and she was *not* to forward letters. I didn't expect any from you, and your letters lately have been the reverse of comforting, and I started off and got to Aylmer's Court yesterday [Pg 277] evening. I took a cab and drove straight there, and when the man opened the door I said: 'I am Mrs. Aylmer; I have come to see my sister-in-law,' and of course there was nothing for it but to let me in, although the flunkey said: 'I don't think she is quite as bad as that, ma'am,' and I looked at him and said: 'What do you mean?' and I had scarcely uttered the words before Miss Keys, so elegantly dressed and looking such a perfect lady, tripped downstairs and said, in a kind tone: 'So you have come! I am glad you have come.' She did, Florence; those were her very words. She said: 'I am glad you have come.' It was so refreshing to hear her, and she took me into one of the spacious reception-rooms—oh! my dear child, a room which ought to be yours by-and-by—and she made me sit down, and then she told me. There have been dreadful things happening, my dear Florence, and that wicked young man whom I took such a fancy to has turned out to be a wolf in sheep's clothing. He broke my poor, dear, *warm-hearted* sister-in-law's heart."

"Now, mother, why do you talk rubbish?" said Florence. "You know Aunt Susan is not warm-hearted."

"She has not been understood," said Mrs. Aylmer, beginning to sob. She took a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped away her tears. "The circumstances of her life have proved how warm her heart is," she continued. "She adopted that young man and he played her false."

"He did not," said Florence.

"He did, Flo; he did. She wanted him to marry—to make a most suitable match—and he refused her. Bertha told me all about it. He was in love with some stupid, poor, plain girl, goodness knows where. Bertha said there was no doubt of it, and he went away and broke with my poor sister, [Pg 278] although she loved him so much and was better than twenty mothers to him. She had just offered him a thousand a year as pocket-money. You will scarcely believe it, Flo, but the ungrateful wretch gave it all up for the sake of that girl. I never heard of such a man, and to think that I should have angled—yes, I did, dear—that you should know him!"

"Here is your tea, mother. Can you not stop talking for a little? You will wear yourself out."

"What a queer, stern, cold voice you have, Florence! You are not half as interested as you used to be."

"Do drink your tea, mother."

Mrs. Aylmer was not proof against the fragrant cup. She broke a piece of toast and put it into her mouth, she sipped her tea, but nothing could stop her narrative.

"Soon after he left, that wicked young man," she resumed, "poor Susan fell ill. She got worse and worse, and what apparently was only a slight attack soon assumed serious dimensions, and there is little hope of her life, and Bertha tells me that she has altered her will or is about to alter it. I cannot quite make out whether it is done or whether it is about to be done; but anyhow, Flo, you and I go back to Aylmer's Court to-night. By hook or by crook we will show ourselves, my love, and I will take the responsibility of leading you into your aunt's room, and you shall go on your knees and beg her forgiveness. That is what I have come about, Florence. It is not too late. Poor Bertha, I can see, is quite on our side. It is not too late, my love; we will catch the very next train." [Pg 279]

"You don't know what you are saying, mother. It is absolutely impossible for me to go."

"My dearest Flo, why?"

"Let me tell you something. You blame Mr. Trevor."

"I always blame ungrateful people," said Mrs. Aylmer, putting on a most virtuous air.

"And yet," said Florence—"yes, I will speak. Do you know who the worthless girl was for whom he gave up great wealth and a high position?"

"How can I tell? I don't want to hear her name."

"*I* was that girl, mother."

"What do you mean?"

"And Bertha knew it," continued Florence; "she knew it well. Oh, I dare not say much against Bertha, but I won't have Mr. Trevor abused. He found out, mother, that, worthless as I am, he loved me. Oh, mother, pity me! pity me!"

Poor Florence suddenly fell on her knees. She bowed her head on the table and burst into tears. It was not often she cried. Mrs. Aylmer did not remember seeing Florence weep since that dreadful morning when they had both fled from Cherry Court in disgrace.

"Flo," she said, "Flo!"

"Pity me, Mummy; pity me!" said Florence.

The next instant the little Mummy's arms were round her.

"Oh, I am so glad you have a heart!" said the little Mummy, "and of course I don't blame him for

loving you, but I do not understand it. Bertha could not have known. She said she was quite a low sort of person. Oh, Flo, my love, this is splendid! You will marry him, of course! I don't believe [Pg 280] Susan has altered her will. You will just get the riches in the very best possible way as his wife. I always said he was a *most* charming young man. It was Bertha who turned me against him. She is awfully clever, Flo, and if I really thought——"

"I dare not say anything against Bertha, mother. But I cannot go to Aylmer's Court; you must not ask it. I am engaged now to Tom Franks, and I won't break my engagement off. I am a very, very unhappy girl."

CHAPTER XLII. [Pg 281]

BERTHA KEYS DEFEATED.

There is little doubt that Mrs. Aylmer was very ill. Step by step an attack, which was apparently at first of little moment, became serious and then dangerous. The cold became pneumonia, the pneumonia became double pneumonia, and now there was a hard fight for life. Nurses were summoned, doctors were requisitioned, everything that wealth could do was employed for the relief and the recovery of the sick woman. But there are times when Death laughs at wealth, with all its contrivances and all its hopes: when Death takes very little heed of what friends say or what doctors do. Death has his own duty to perform, and Mrs. Aylmer's time had come. Notwithstanding the most recent remedies for the fell disease, notwithstanding the care of the best nurses London could supply and the skill of the cleverest doctors, Death entered that sick-chamber and stood by that woman's pillow and whispered to her that her hour had come.

Mrs. Aylmer, propped up in her bed so that she might breathe better, her face ghastly with the terrible exertion, called Bertha to her side. She could scarcely speak, but she managed to convey her meaning to the girl.

"I am very bad; I know I shall not recover."

"You have to make your will over again," said Bertha, who was as cool as cool could be in this [Pg 282] emergency. Not one of the nurses could be more collected or calm than Bertha. She herself would have made a splendid nurse, for she had tact and sympathy, and the sort of voice which never grated on the ear. The doctors were almost in love with her: they thought they had never seen so capable a girl, so grave, so quiet, so suitably dressed, so invaluable in all emergencies.

Mrs. Aylmer could scarcely bear Bertha out of her sight, and the doctors said to themselves: "Small wonder!"

On the afternoon of the day when Mrs. Aylmer the less went to see Florence in London, Mrs. Aylmer the great went down another step in the dark valley. The doctor said that she might live for two or three days more, but that he did not think it likely. The disease was spreading, and soon it would be impossible for her to breathe. She was frightened. She had not spent a specially good life. She had given, it is true, large sums in charity, but she had not really ever helped the poor, and had not brought a smile to the lip or a tear of thankfulness to the eye. She had lived a hard life; she had thought far more of herself than of her neighbour, and now that she was about to die it seemed to her that she was not ready. For the first time, all the importance of money faded from her mind. No matter how rich she was and how great, she would have to leave the world with a naked, unclothed soul. She could not take any of her great possessions with her, nor could she offer to her Maker a single thing which would satisfy Him, when He made up the balance of her account. She was frightened about herself. [Pg 283]

"Bertha," she said to her young companion, "come here, Bertha."

Bertha bent over her.

"Is it true that I am not going to get better?"

"You are very ill," said Bertha; "you ought to make your will."

"But I have made it: what do you mean?"

"I thought," said Bertha, "that"—she paused, then she said gravely: "you have not altered it since Maurice Trevor went away. I thought that you had made up your mind that he and Florence Aylmer were not to inherit your property."

"Of course I have," said the sick woman, a frightened, anxious look coming into her eyes. "Not that it much matters," she added, after a pause. "Florence is as good as another, and if Maurice really cares for her——"

"Oh, impossible," said Bertha; "you know you do not wish all your estates, your lands, your money, to pass into the hands of that wicked, deceitful girl."

"I have heard," said Mrs. Aylmer, still speaking in that gasping voice, "that Florence is doing great things for herself in London."

"What do you mean?"

"She is considered clever. She is writing very brilliantly. After all, there is such a thing as literary fame, and if at the eleventh hour she achieves it, why, she as well as another may inherit my wealth, and I am too tired, Bertha, too tired to worry now."

"You know she must *not* have your property!" said Bertha. "I will send for Mr. Wiltshire: you said you would alter the will: it is only to add a codicil to the last one, and the deed is done." [Pg 284]

"As you please," said Mrs. Aylmer.

Bertha hurried away.

Mr. Wiltshire, Mrs. Aylmer's lawyer, lived in the nearest town, five miles distant. Bertha wrote him a letter and sent a man on horseback to his house. The lawyer arrived about nine o'clock that evening.

"You must see her at once: she may not live till the morning," said Bertha. There was a pink spot on each of Bertha's cheeks, and her eyes were very bright.

"I made my client's will six months ago. All her affairs are in perfect order. What does this mean?" said Mr. Wiltshire.

"Mrs. Aylmer and I have had a long conversation lately, and I know Mrs. Aylmer wants to alter her will," said Bertha. "Mr. Trevor has offended her seriously: he has repudiated all her kindness and left the house."

"Dear, dear!" said the lawyer; "how sad!"

"How ungrateful, you mean!" said Bertha.

"That is quite true. How different from your conduct, my dear young lady."

As the lawyer spoke, he looked full into Bertha's excited face.

"Ah!" said Miss Keys, with a sigh, "if I had that wealth I should know what to do with it; for instance, you, Mr. Wiltshire, should not suffer."

Now, Mr. Wiltshire was not immaculate. He had often admired Bertha: he had thought her an extremely taking girl. It had even occurred to him that, under certain conditions, she might be a very suitable wife for him. He was a widower of ten years' standing. [Pg 285]

"I will see my client now that I have come," he said, rising. "Perhaps you had better prepare her for my visit."

"She knows you are coming. I will take you up at once."

"But it may be too great a shock."

"Not at all; she is past all that sort of thing. Come this way."

Bertha and the lawyer entered the heavily-curtained, softly carpeted room. Their footsteps made no sound as they crossed the floor. The nurses withdrew and they approached the bedside. Bertha had ink and paper ready to hand. The lawyer held out his hand to Mrs. Aylmer.

"My dear, dear friend," he said, in that solemn voice which he thought befitting a death-bed and which he only used on these special occasions, "this is a most trying moment; but if I can do anything to relieve your mind, and to help you to a just disposition of the great wealth with which Providence has endowed you, it may ease your last moments."

"Yes," said Mrs. Aylmer, in a choking voice, "they are my last moments; but I think all my affairs are settled."

Bertha looked at him and withdrew. Her eyes seemed to say: "Take my part, and you will not repent it."

Mr. Wiltshire immediately took his cue.

"I am given to understand that Mr. Trevor has offended you," he said; "is that so?"

"He has, mortally; but I am too ill to worry now."

"It will be easy to put a codicil to your will if you have any fresh desires with regard to your property," said Mr. Wiltshire. [Pg 286]

"I am dying, Mr. Wiltshire. When you come to face death, you don't much care about money. It cannot go with you, you know."

"But it can stay behind you, my dear madam, and do good to others."

"True, true."

"I fear, I greatly fear that Mr. Trevor may squander it," said Mr. Wiltshire slowly.

"I have no one else to leave it to."

"There is that charming and excellent girl; but dare I suggest it?"

"Which charming and excellent girl?"

"Your secretary and companion, Miss Bertha Keys."

"Ay," said Mrs. Aylmer, "but I should be extremely sorry that she should inherit my money."

"Indeed, and why? No one has been more faithful to you. I know she does not expect a farthing; it would be a graceful surprise. She has one of the longest heads for business I have ever come across; she is an excellent girl."

"Write a codicil and put her name into it," said Mrs. Aylmer fretfully; "I will leave her something."

Pleased even with this assent, somewhat ungraciously given, the lawyer now sat down and wrote some sentences rapidly.

"The sum you will leave to her," he said: "ten, twenty, thirty, forty, shall we say *fifty* thousand pounds, my dear Mrs. Aylmer?" [Pg 287]

"Forty—fifty if you like—*anything*! Oh, I am choking—I shall die!" cried Mrs. Aylmer.

Mr. Wiltshire hastily inserted the words "fifty thousand pounds" in the codicil. He then took a pen, and called two of the nurses into the room.

"You must witness this," he said. "Please support the patient with pillows. Now, my dear Mrs. Aylmer, just put your name there."

The pen was put into the trembling hand.

"I am giving my money back to—but what does this mean?" Mrs. Aylmer pushed the paper away.

"Sign, sign," said the lawyer; "it is according to your instructions; it is all right. Sign it."

"Poor lady! It is a shame to worry her on the very confines of the grave," said one of the nurses angrily.

"Just write here; you know you have the strength. Here is the pen."

The lawyer put the pen into Mrs. Aylmer's hand. She held it limply for a minute and began to sign. The first letter of her Christian name appeared in a jagged form, the next letter was about to begin when the hand fell and the pen was no longer grasped in the feeble fingers.

"I am about to meet my Maker," she said, with a great sob; "send for the clergyman. Take that away."

"I shall not allow the lady to be worried any longer," said one of the nurses, with flashing eyes.

Mr. Wiltshire was defeated; so was Bertha Keys. The clergyman came and sat for a long time with the sick woman. She listened to what he had to say and then put a question to him.

"I am stronger than I was earlier in the day. I can do what I could not do a few hours back. Oh, I know well that I shall never recover, but before I go hence I want to give back what was entrusted to me." [Pg 288]

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"I mean my money, my wealth; I wish to return it to God."

"Have you not made your will? It is always right that we should leave our affairs in perfect order."

"I wish to make a fresh will, and at once. My lawyer, Mr. Wiltshire, has come and gone. He wanted me to sign a codicil which would have been wicked. God did not wish it, so He took my strength away. I could not sign the codicil, but now I can sign a fresh will which may be made. If I dictate a fresh will to you, and I put my proper signature, and two nurses sign it, will it be legal?"

"Quite legal," replied the clergyman.

"I will tell you my wishes. Get paper."

The minister crossed the room, took a sheet of paper from a table which stood in the window, and prepared to write.

Mrs. Aylmer's eyes were bright, her voice no longer trembling, and she spoke quickly.

"I, Susan Aylmer, of Aylmer's Court, Shropshire, being quite in my right mind, leave, with the exception of a small legacy of fifty pounds a year to my sister-in-law, Mrs. Aylmer, of Dawlish, all the money I possess to two London hospitals to be chosen by my executor.—Have you put *all* the money I possess?" she enquired.

"Yes; but is your will fair?" he said. "Have you no other relations to whom you ought to leave some of your wealth?" [Pg 289]

"I give all that I possess back to God. He gave me my wealth, and He shall have it again," repeated Mrs. Aylmer; and she doubtless thought she was doing a noble thing.

This brief will was signed without any difficulty by the dying woman and attested by the two nurses. Two hours later, the rich woman left her wealth behind her and went to meet her God.

CHAPTER XLIII.

[Pg 290]

MRS. AYLMER'S WILL.

Nothing would induce Florence to go to Aylmer's Court and Mrs. Aylmer the less, in great distress of mind, was forced to remain with her in her flat that evening.

Florence gave her the very best that the flat contained, sleeping herself on the sofa in her sitting-room.

Mrs. Aylmer sat up late and talked and talked until she could talk no longer. At last Florence got her into bed, and then went to visit Edith in her room.

"You don't look well," said Edith; "your engagement has not improved you. What is the matter?"

"I don't exactly know what is the matter," said Florence. "I am worried about mother's visit. My aunt, Mrs. Aylmer, is dying. She is a very rich woman. Mother is under the impression that, if she and I went to Aylmer's Court, Mrs. Aylmer might leave me her property. I don't want it; I should hate to have it. I have learned in the last few months that money is not everything. I don't want to have Aunt Susan's money."

"Well," replied Edith, staring her full in the face, "that is the most sensible speech you have made for a long time. I have closely studied the question of economics, and have long ago come to the conclusion that the person of medium income is the only person who is truly happy. I am even [Pg 291] inclined to believe that living from hand to mouth is the most enviable state of existence. You never know how the cards will turn up; but the excitement is intense. When I am a doctor, I shall watch people's faces with intense interest, wondering whether, when their next illness comes on, they will send for me; then there will be the counting up of my earnings, and putting my little money by, and living *just* within my means. And then I shall have such wide interests besides money: the cure of my patients, their love and gratitude to me afterwards. It is my opinion, Florence, that the more we live *outside* money, and the smaller place money takes in the pleasures of our lives, the happier we are; for, after all, money can do so little, and I don't think any other people can be so miserable as the vastly rich ones."

"I agree with you," said Florence.

"It is more than Tom does," replied Edith, looking fixedly at her. "After all, Florence, are you not in some ways too good for my brother?"

"In some ways too good for him?" repeated Florence. She turned very white. "You don't know me," she added.

"I don't believe I do, and, it occurs to me, the more I am with you the less I know you. Florence, is it true that you have a secret in your life?"

"It is quite true," said Florence, raising her big dark eyes and fixing them on the face of her future sister-in-law.

"And is it a secret that Tom knows nothing about?"

"A secret, Edith, as you say, that Tom knows nothing about." [Pg 292]

"How very dreadful! And you are going to marry him holding that secret?"

"Yes; I shall not reveal it. If I did, he would not marry me."

"But what is it, my dear? Won't you even tell me?"

"No, Edith. Tom marries me for a certain purpose. He gets what he wants. I do not feel that I am doing wrong in giving myself to him; but, wrong or right, the thing is arranged: why worry about it now?"

"You are a strange girl. I am sorry you are going to marry my brother. I do not believe you will be at all happy, but, as I have said already, I have expressed my opinion."

"The marriage is to take place quite quietly three weeks from now," said Florence. "We have arranged everything. We are not going to have an ordinary wedding. I shall be married in my travelling-dress. Tom says he can barely spend a week away from his editorial work, and he wants me to live in a flat with him at first."

"Oh, those flats are so detestable," said Edith; "no air, and you are crushed into such a tiny space; but I suppose Tom will sacrifice everything to the sitting-rooms."

"He means to have a salon: he wants to get all the great and witty and wise around us. It ought to be an interesting future," said Florence in a dreary tone.

Edith gazed at her again.

"Well," she said, after a pause, "I suppose great talent like yours does content one. You certainly are marvellously brilliant. I read your last story, and thought it the cleverest of the three. But I wish you were not so pessimistic. It is terrible not to help people. It seems to me you hinder people when you write as you do." [Pg 293]

"I must write as the spirit moves me," said Florence, in a would-be flippant voice, "and Tom likes my writing; he says it grows on him."

"So much the worse for Tom."

"Well, I will say good-night now, Edith. I am tired, and mother will be disturbed if I go to bed too late."

Florence went into her own flat, shut and locked the door, and, lying down, tried to sleep. But she was excited and nervous, and no repose would come to her. Up to the present time, since her engagement, she had managed to keep thought at bay; but now thoughts the most terrible, the most dreary, came in like a flood and banished sleep. Towards morning she found herself silently crying.

"Oh, why cannot I break off my engagement with Tom Franks? Why cannot I tell Maurice Trevor the truth?" she said to herself.

Early the next day Mrs. Aylmer the less received a telegram from Bertha Keys. This was to announce the death of the owner of Aylmer's Court. Mrs. Aylmer the less immediately became almost frantic with excitement. She wanted to insist on Florence accompanying her at once to the Court. Florence stoutly refused to stir an inch. Finally the widow was obliged to go off without her daughter.

"There is little doubt," she said, "that we are both handsomely remembered. I, of course, have my fifty pounds a year—that was settled on me many years ago—but I shall have far more than that now, and you, my poor child, will have a nice tidy fortune, ten to twelve or twenty thousand pounds, and then if you will only marry Maurice Trevor, who inherits all the rest of the wealth, how comfortable you will be! I suppose you would like me to live with you at Aylmer's Court, would you not?" [Pg 294]

"Oh, mother, don't," said poor Florence. "I have a feeling which I cannot explain that Mrs. Aylmer will disappoint everyone. Don't count on her wealth, mother. Oh, mother, don't think so much of money, for it is not the most important thing in the world."

"Money not the most important thing in the world!" said Mrs. Aylmer, backing and looking at her daughter with bright eyes of horror. "Flo, my poor child, you really are getting weak in your intellect."

A few moments afterwards she left, sighing deeply as she did so, and Florence, to her own infinite content, was left behind.

The next few days passed without anything special occurring; then the news of Mrs. Aylmer's extraordinary will was given to Florence in her mother's graphic language.

"Although she is dead, poor thing, she certainly always was a monster," wrote the widow. "I cannot explain to you what I feel. I have begged of Mr. Trevor to dispute the will; but, would you believe it?—unnatural man that he is, he seems more pleased than otherwise.

"My little money is still to the fore, but no one else seems to have been remembered. As to that poor dear Bertha Keys, she has not been left a penny. If she had not saved two or three hundred pounds during the time of her companionship to that heathenish woman, she would now be penniless. It is a fearful blow, and I cannot think for which of our sins it has been inflicted on us. It is too terrible, and the way Maurice Trevor takes it is the worst of all." [Pg 295]

When Florence read this letter, she could not help clapping her hands.

"I cannot understand it," she said to herself; "but a great load seems to have rolled away from me. Of course, I never expected Aunt Susan's money, but mother has been harping upon it as long as I can remember. I don't think Maurice wanted it greatly. It seemed to me that that money brought a curse with it. I wonder if things are going to be happier now. Oh, dear, I am glad—yes, I am glad that it has not been left to any of us."

Florence's feelings of rapture, however, were likely soon to be mitigated. Her wedding-day was approaching.

Mrs. Aylmer the less, who had at first told Florence that she could not on any account marry for three or four months, owing to the sad death in the family, wrote now to say that the sooner she secured Tom Franks the better.

"Maurice Trevor is a pauper," she said, "not worth any girl's serious consideration. Marry Mr. Franks, my dear Florence; he is not up to much, but doubtless he is the best you can get. You need not show the smallest respect to Susan Aylmer; the wedding need not be put off a single hour on her account."

Nor did Flo nor Tom intend to postpone the wedding. Mrs. Aylmer had not been loved by

Florence, and, as the couple were to be married quietly, there was not the least occasion why the ceremony should be delayed. Florence had not a trousseau, in the ordinary sense of the word. [Pg 296]

"I have no money," she said, looking full at Edith.

Tom Franks happened to come into the room at the time.

"What are you talking about?" he said. "By the way, here is a letter for you."

As he spoke, he laid a letter on the table near Florence's side. She glanced at it, saw that it was in the handwriting of Bertha Keys, and did not give it a further thought.

"Flo is thinking about her trousseau; all brides require trousseaux," said Edith, who, although unorthodox in most things, did not think it seemly that a bride should go to the altar without fine clothes.

"But why should we worry about a trousseau?" replied Tom. "I take Florence for what she is, not for her dress; and I can give you things in Paris," he added, looking at her. "I have some peculiar ideas, and my own notions with regard to your future dress. You want a good deal of rich colour, and rich stuffs, and nothing too girlish. You are very young, but you will look still younger if you are dressed somewhat old, as I mean to dress you. We will get your evening dress in Paris. I am not a rich man, but I have saved up money for the purpose."

"I don't really care about clothes at all," said Florence.

"I know that; but you will change your mind. With your particular style, you must be careful how you dress. I will manage it. Don't waste your money on anything now. I want you to come to me as you are."

Tom then sat down near Florence, and began to give her particulars with regard to several flats which he had looked over. He was a keen man of business, and talked £. *s. d.* until the girl was tired of the subject. [Pg 297]

"I shall take the flat in Fortescue Mansions to-morrow morning," he said finally; "it will just suit us. There is a very fine reception-room, and, what is still better, all the reception-rooms open one into the other. We must begin to give our weekly salons as soon as ever you return from your wedding tour, Florence."

"Surely you will wait until people call on Florence?" interrupted Edith. "You are too quick, Tom, for anything. You must not transgress all the ordinary rules of society."

Tom looked at his sister, shut up his firm lips, and turned away; he did not even vouchsafe to answer.

A moment later, he left the room. It was his custom when he met Florence to kiss her coldly on the forehead, and to repeat this ceremony when he left her. He did not neglect this little attention on the present occasion. As his steps, in his patent-leather boots, were heard descending the stairs, Edith saw Florence raise her handkerchief to her forehead and rub the spot which Tom's lips had touched.

"How heartily you dislike him!" said Edith. "I would not marry him if I were you."

Florence made no reply. She took up her letter and prepared to leave the room.

"Why do you go? There is a good fire here, and there is none in your room. Sit by the fire, and make yourself comfy. I am going out for a little."

CHAPTER XLIV. [Pg 298]

BERTHA CHANGES HER TONE.

Edith pinned on her hat as she spoke, and a moment later left the flat. Florence looked around her. She sank into an easy-chair, and opened the letter. It was, as she already knew, from Bertha. She began to read it languidly, but soon its contents caused her to start; her eyes grew bright with a strange mixture of fear, relief, and apprehension. Bertha had written as follows:—

"My Dear Florence—

"You will doubtless, long ere this, have been told of the fearful blow which the late Mrs. Aylmer of Aylmer's Court has inflicted on us all. Kind as we have been to her, and faithfully as we have served her—I allude especially here to myself—we have been cut off without a farthing whereas two monstrous establishments have been left the benefit of her wealth. The clergyman, Mr. Edwards, is responsible for this act of what I call sacrilege. She made him write a will for her just after poor Mr. Wiltshire had departed. It is, I believe, quite in proper form, and there is not a loophole of escape. Mr. Edwards knew what he was about. Mrs. Aylmer gave her money, as she thought, back to God: a very queer way of doing charity—to leave those nearest to her to starve. [Pg 299]

"However, my dear Florence, to come to the point, I, who have spent the last five years of my life absolutely devoted to this woman, serving her hand and foot, day and night, at all times and all seasons, have not even had a ten-pound note left to me for my pains. It is true that I shall receive my salary, which happens to be a very good one, up to the end of the present quarter. After that, as far as I am concerned, I might as well never have known Aylmer's Court nor its mistress. Fortunately I was able to feather my nest to a very small extent while with her, and have a few hundred pounds with which to face the world.

"Now, Florence, I hope you are somewhat prepared for what is about to follow. It is this: I shall be obliged in the future to use my talent for my own aggrandisement. I find that it is a very marketable commodity. A few months' use of it has placed you in great comfort; it has also brought you fame, and, further, a very excellent husband. What the said future husband will say when the *dénouement* is revealed to him—as of course revealed it will be—is more than I can say. But you must face the fact that I can no longer supply you with stories or essays. I *myself* will write my own stories, and send them *myself* to the different papers, and the golden sovereigns, my dear, will roll into *my* pocket, and not into *yours*. You will naturally say: 'How will you do this, and face the shame of your actions in the past?' But the fact is, I am not at all ashamed, nor do I mind confessing exactly what I have done. My talent is my own, and it is my opinion that the world will crowd after me all the more because I have done this daring thing, and you, my poor little understudy for the time being, will be my understudy no [Pg 300] longer. I take the part of leading lady once for all *myself*. I am coming up to London to-morrow, and will call to see you, as, on consideration, I think that fourth story which you are preparing for the *Argonaut* might as well appear with my name to it.

"Yours very sincerely,

"Bertha Keys."

Florence perused this letter two or three times; then she put it in her pocket and entered her bed-room. She did not quite know what she was doing. She felt a little giddy, but there was a queer, unaccountable sense of relief all over her. On her desk lay her own neat copy of the story which she was preparing for the *Argonaut*. By the side of the desk also was quite a pile of letters from different publishers offering her work and good pay. These letters Tom Franks insisted on her either taking no notice of or merely writing to decline the advantageous offers. She took them up now.

"Messrs. So-and-so would be glad to see Miss Aylmer. They could offer her...." And then came terms which would have made the mouths of most girls water. Or Florence received a letter asking her if she would undertake to write three or four stories for such a paper, the terms to be what she herself liked to ask. She looked at them all wistfully. It is true she had not yet lighted a fire in her room, but she put a match to it now, in order to burn the publishers' letters. The story she was copying was about half-done. She had meant to finish it from Bertha's manuscript before [Pg 301] she went out. She smiled to herself as she looked.

"I need never finish it now," she thought.

Just as this thought came to her she heard a tap at her door. It was a messenger with a note. She told him to wait, and opened it. It was from Franks.

"I quite forgot when I saw you an hour ago to ask you to let me have manuscript of the next story without fail this evening. Can you send it now by messenger, or shall he call again for it within a couple of hours? This is urgent.

"Thomas Franks."

Florence sat down and wrote a brief reply.

"I am very sorry, but you cannot have manuscript to-night.

"Florence Aylmer."

The messenger departed with this note, and Florence dressed herself to go out, and she went quickly downstairs. She walked until she saw the special omnibus which she was looking for. She was taken straight to Hampstead, and she walked up the steep hill until she found the little cottage which she had visited months ago in the late summer-time. Florence went to the door, and a neat servant with an apple-blossom face opened it.

"Is Mrs. Trevor in?" asked Florence.

"Yes, miss; what name shall I say?"

Florence gave her name: "Miss Florence Aylmer."

She was immediately ushered into the snug drawing-room, bright with firelight. She shut her eyes, and a feeling of pain went through her heart. [Pg 302]

"The way of transgressors is very, very hard," she thought. "Shall I ever keep straight? What a

miserable character I must be!"

Just then Mrs. Trevor entered the room. She had not been pleased with Florence; she had not been pleased with her manner to her son. Mothers guess things quickly, and she had guessed Maurice's secret many months ago.

Florence held out her hand wistfully, and looked full at the little widow.

"I have come to speak to you," she said. "I want to know if you will"—her lips trembled—"advise me."

"Sit down, my dear," said Mrs. Trevor. She motioned Florence to a seat, but the girl did not take it.

"I have come to you, as the only one in all the world who can help me," continued Florence. "I have something very terrible to say, and I thought perhaps you would listen, and perhaps you would advise. May I speak to you just because I am a very lonely girl and you are a woman?"

"If you put it in that way, of course you may speak," said Mrs. Trevor. "To tell you the truth, I have been displeased with you; I have thought that you have not been fair."

"To whom?" asked Florence.

"To my son Maurice."

Florence coloured; then she put her hand to her heart.

"You never replied to my letter, Mrs. Trevor."

"What was there to say?"

"Will you tell me now what you thought of it?"

Mrs. Trevor had seated herself by the fire. She held out her small hands to the grateful blaze; then she looked round at the girl.

"Sit down, child," she said; "take off your hat. If you wish to know what I really thought, I imagined that you were a little hysterical and that you had overstated things. Girls of your age [Pg 303] are apt to do so. I was very sorry, for Maurice's sake, that you did not accept my offer; but otherwise I prefer to be alone."

"I see. Well, I must tell you now that I did not exaggerate. I have been bad through and through: quite unworthy of your attention and care: quite unworthy of Mr. Maurice's regard."

"That is extremely likely," said the mother of Mr. Maurice, drawing herself up in a stately fashion.

"Oh, don't be unkind to me; do bear with me while I tell you. Afterwards I shall go away somewhere, but I must relieve my soul. Oh, it is so sinful!"

"Speak, child, speak. Who am I that I should turn away from you?"

"Years ago," began Florence, speaking in a dreary tone, "I was at a school called Cherry Court School. While there I was assailed by a very great temptation. The patron of the school, Sir John Wallis, offered a prize on certain conditions to the girls. The prize meant a great deal, and covered a wide curriculum.

"It was a great opportunity, and I struggled hard to win; but Sir John Wallis, although he offered the prize to the school, in reality wanted a girl called Kitty Sharston, who was the daughter of his old friend, to get it.

"Kitty Sharston was supposed to be most likely to win the prize, and she did win it in the end; but let me tell you how. In the school was a girl as pupil teacher, whose name was Bertha Keys."

"What!" cried Mrs. Trevor: "the girl who has been companion to Mrs. Aylmer: whom my son has so often mentioned?" [Pg 304]

"The very same girl. Oh, I don't want to abuse her too much, and yet I cannot tell my terrible story without mentioning her. She tempted me; she was very clever, and she tempted me mightily. She wrote the essay for me, the prize essay which was hers, not mine. Oh, I know you are shocked, I feel your hand trembling; but let me hold it; don't draw it away. She wrote the essay, and it was read aloud before all the guests and all the other girls as mine, and I won the Scholarship; yes, I won it through the essay written by Bertha Keys."

"That was very terrible, my dear. How could you bear it? How could you?"

"I went to London. You remember how I came to see you. I had very little money, just twenty pounds, and mother, who had only fifty pounds a year, could not help me, and I was so wretched that I did not know what to do. I went from one place to another offering myself as teacher, although I hated teaching and I could not teach well; but no one wanted me, and I was in despair, and I used to get so desperately *hungry* too. Oh, you cannot tell what it is to want a meal—just to have a good dinner, say, once a week, and bread-and-butter all the rest of the days. Oh, you do feel so empty when you live on bread-and-butter and nothing else! Then I had a letter from Bertha, and she made me a proposal. She sent with the letter a manuscript. Ah! I feel you start now."

"This is terrible!" said Mrs. Trevor. She stood up in her excitement; she backed a little way from Florence.

"You guess all, but I must go on telling you," continued the poor girl. "She sent this manuscript, and she asked me to use it as my own. She said she did not want any of the money, and she spoke specious words, and I was tempted. But I struggled, I did struggle. It was Miss Franks who really [Pg 305] was the innocent cause of pushing me over the gulf, for she read the manuscript and said it was very clever, and she showed it to her brother, the man I am now engaged to, and he said it was clever, and it was accepted for the *Argonaut* almost before I knew what I was doing; and that was the beginning of everything. I was famous. Bertha was the person who wrote the stories and the essays. I was wearing borrowed plumes, and I was not a bit clever; and, oh, Mrs. Trevor, the end has come now, for Mrs. Aylmer has died and has left all her great wealth to the hospitals, and I have had a letter from Bertha. You may read it, Mrs. Trevor: do read it. This Is what Bertha says."

As Florence spoke, she thrust Bertha's letter into Mrs. Trevor's hand.

"I will ring for a light," said the widow. She approached the bell, rang it, and the little rosy-faced servant appeared.

"Tea, Mary, at once for two, and some hot cakes, and bring a lamp, please.

"I am glad and I am sorry you have told me," she said. "I will read the letter when the lamp comes. Now warm yourself.

"You poor girl," she said. "I will not touch this letter until I see you looking better.

"I will read this in another room," she said; "you would like to be alone for a little."

She left the room softly with Bertha's letter, and Florence still sat on by the fire. She sat so for some time, and presently, soothed by the warmth, and weary from all the agony she had undergone, the tired-out girl dropped asleep.

CHAPTER XLV. [Pg 306]

"ALL THE ROSES ARE DEAD."

When she awoke she heard someone moving in the room. There was the rustling of a paper and the creak of a chair.

"Oh, Mrs. Trevor, have I told you everything?" she said, and she sprang to her feet, the color suffusing her cheeks and her eyes growing bright. "And are you going to send me out into the cold? Are you never going to speak to me again? Are you going to forsake me?"

"No, no; sit down," said a voice, and then Florence did indeed color painfully, for Mrs. Trevor was not in the room, but Maurice Trevor stood before the excited girl.

"My mother has told me the whole story," he said.

He looked perturbed, his voice shook with emotion, and his face was pale, and there was an angry scowl in his eyes. He took Florence's hand and pushed her into a chair.

"Sit down," he said. She looked up at him drearily.

"All the roses are dead," she said softly; "the time of roses is over."

"No, it is not over; it will come back again at the proper season," said Trevor; "and don't think that I—"

"But do you know—"

"I know," he answered gravely. He bowed his head; then he drew a chair forward.

"I must speak to you," he said.

"You know everything?" she repeated. [Pg 307]

"I do," he said. "I am glad you came to mother and told her. It is true I suspected much. You know that passage in Miss Keys's handwriting which I told you about some time ago, and the identically same passage in the newspaper article which was supposed to be yours?—to a great extent my eyes were opened at that time, but not completely."

"You look very, very angry," she said.

"I am angry," he answered; "but, I think I can say with truth, not with you."

"With Bertha?"

"Please do not mention her name."

"But I have been to blame: I have been terribly weak."

"You have been terribly weak; you have been worse. You have done wrong, great wrong; but, Florence—may I call you by your Christian name?—winter comes in every year, but it is followed by spring, and spring is followed by summer, and in summer the roses bloom again, and the time of roses comes back, Florence, and it will come back even to you."

"No, no," she said, and she began to sob piteously.

"You have been so good, so more than good to me," she said. "If you had known you would have despised me."

"If I had known I should have gone straight to Miss Keys and put a stop to this disgraceful thing," was the young man's answer. "I suppose, Florence," he added, after a pause, "you, if you have time to think of me at all, pity me now because I am a penniless man."

"Oh, no, no," she replied; "it is not good for people to be too rich. I have quite come to be of that opinion."

"Thank God, then, we are both of one way of thinking because God, though He has not given you this special talent, has given you much."

"Much," she repeated, vaguely. [Pg 308]

"Yes," he repeated, speaking earnestly: "He has given you attractiveness, great earnestness of purpose, and oh! a thousand other things. He has at least done this for you, Florence: He has made you so that in all the wide world you are the only woman for me. I can love no one but you, Florence—no one else—no one else, even though you did fall."

"You cannot: it is impossible," answered Florence. "You cannot love me now."

"I have loved you all through, and this thing does not alter my love. You see, Florence," he added, "it was not the girl who was famous that I cared for. I never did care a bit about the wonderful writing which was supposed to be yours. Far from liking it, I hated it. I never wanted a wife who would be either famous or clever."

"And Tom Franks," continued Florence, "only wants me because he thinks me clever. But he will not wish to marry me now."

"I only wanted you for yourself. Will you wait for me and let me try to make a home for you, and when I have done that, will you come to me? I am going away to Australia; I have heard of a good post there, and I am going out almost at once, and if things succeed, you and the mother can come to me, and in the meantime will you stay with her and comfort her?"

"Oh, you are too good," said poor Florence; but she did not cry now. She clasped her hands and gazed straight into the fire; then she looked up at Trevor with awe.

"God must have forgiven me when He sent you to me," she said simply.

The next moment he had clasped her in his arms.

CHAPTER XLVI. [Pg 309]

A DENOUEMENT.

Tom Franks was seated before his desk in his office. He was a good deal perturbed. His calm was for the time being destroyed, although it wanted but a week to his wedding-day. He did not look at all like a happy bride-groom.

"It is a case of jilting," he said to himself, and he took up a letter which he had received from Florence that morning. It was very short and ran as follows:

> "I cannot marry you, and you will soon know why. When you know the reason you won't want me. I am terribly sorry, but sorrow won't alter matters. Please do not expect the manuscript. Yours truly,
>
> "Florence Aylmer."

"What does the girl mean?" he said to himself. "Really, at the present moment, the most annoying part of all is the fact that I have not received the manuscript. The printers are waiting for it. The new number of the *Argonaut* will be nothing without it. The story was advertised in the last number, and all our readers will expect it."

A clerk came in at that moment.

"Has Miss Aylmer's manuscript come, sir?" he said. "The printers are waiting for it." [Pg 310]

"The printers must wait, Dawson; I shall be going to see Miss Aylmer and will bring the manuscript back. Here, hand me a telegram form. I want to send a wire in a hurry."

The clerk did so. Franks dictated a few words aloud: "Will call to see you at twelve o'clock. Please

remain in."

He gave the man Florence's address, and he departed with the telegram. Franks looked up at the clock.

He thought for a little longer. Anderson opened the door of his room and called him.

"Is that you, Franks?"

"Yes, sir."

"May I speak to you for a moment?"

"Certainly," replied Franks. He went into his chief's room and shut the door.

"I have been thinking, Franks," said Mr. Anderson, "whether we do well to encourage that extremely pessimistic writing which Miss Florence Aylmer supplies us with."

"Do well to encourage it?" said Franks, opening his eyes very wide.

"I have hesitated to speak to you," continued Mr. Anderson, "because you are engaged to the young lady, and you naturally, and very justly, are proud of her abilities; but the strain in which she addresses her public is beginning to be noticed, and although her talent attracts, her morbidity and want of all hope will in the end tell against the *Argonaut*, and even still more against the *General Review*. I wish you would have a serious talk with her, Franks, and tell her that unless she alters the tone of her writings—my dear fellow, I am sorry to pain you, but really I cannot accept them."

Franks uttered a bitter laugh. [Pg 311]

"You are very likely to have your wish, sir," he said. "I am even now writing for the manuscript for the fourth story which you know was advertised in the last *Argonaut*."

"I believe she will always write according to her convictions."

"And that is what pains me so much," continued Mr. Anderson. "I have myself looked over her proofs, and have endeavoured to infuse a cheerful note into them; but cutting won't do it, nor will removing certain passages. The same miserable, unnatural outlook pervades every word she says. I believe her mind is made that way."

"You are not very complimentary," said Franks, almost losing his temper. He was quiet for a moment, then he said slowly: "We are very likely to have to do without Miss Aylmer. I begin to think that she is a very strange girl. She has offered to release me from my engagement; in fact, she has declared that she will not go on with it, and says that she cannot furnish us with any more manuscripts."

"Then, in the name of Heaven, what are we to do for the next number?" said Mr. Anderson. "Look through all available manuscripts at once, my dear fellow; there is not a moment to lose."

"I'll do better than that," replied Franks. "Our public expect a story by Miss Aylmer in the next number, and if possible they must have it. I have already wired to say that I will call upon her, and with your permission, as the time is nearly up, I will go to Prince's Mansions now."

"It may be best," said Mr. Anderson. He looked gloomy and anxious. "You can cut the new story a bit cannot you, Franks?" [Pg 312]

"I will do my best, sir."

The young man went out of the room. He was just crossing his own apartment when the door was opened and his clerk came in.

"A lady to see you, sir: she says her business is pressing."

"A lady to see me! Say I am going out. I cannot see anyone at present. Who is she? Has she come by appointment?"

"She has not come by appointment, sir; her name is Miss Keys—Miss Bertha Keys."

"I never heard of her. Say that I am obliged to go out and cannot see her to-day; ask her to call another time. Leave me now, Dawson; I want to keep my appointment with Miss Aylmer."

Dawson left the room.

He then crossed the room to the peg where he kept his coat and hat, and was preparing to put them on when once again Dawson appeared.

"Miss Keys says she has come about Miss Aylmer's business, and she thinks you will not lose any time if you see her, sir."

Bertha Keys had quietly entered the apartment behind the clerk.

"I have come on the subject of Florence Aylmer and the manuscript you expect her to send you," said Bertha Keys. "Will you give me two or three moments of your valuable time?"

Dawson glanced at Franks. Franks nodded to him to withdraw, and the next moment Miss Keys

and Mr. Franks found themselves alone.

Franks did not speak at all for a moment. Bertha in the meantime was taking his measure. [Pg 313]

"May I sit down?" she said. "I am a little tired; I have come all the way from Shropshire this morning."

Franks pushed a chair towards her, but still did not speak. She looked at him, and a faint smile dawned round her lips.

"You are expecting Florence Aylmer's manuscript, are you not?" she said then.

He nodded, but his manner was as much as to say: "What business is it of yours?"

He was magnetized by the curious expression in her eyes; he thought he had never seen such clever eyes before. He was beginning to be interested in her.

"I have come about Florence's manuscript; but, all the same, you bitterly resent my intrusion. By the way, you are engaged to marry Florence Aylmer?"

"I was," replied Franks shortly; "but pardon me. I am extremely busy: if she has chosen you as her messenger to bring the manuscript, will you kindly give it to me and go?"

"How polite!" said Bertha, with a smile. "I have not brought any manuscript from Florence Aylmer; but I have brought a manuscript from myself."

Franks uttered an angry exclamation.

"Have you forced your way into my room about that?" he said.

"I have. You have received and published three stories *purporting* to be by the pen of Florence Aylmer. You have also published one or two articles by the same person. You are waiting for the fourth story, which was promised to the readers of the *Argonaut* in last month's number. The first three stories made a great sensation. You are impatient and disturbed because the fourth story has not come to hand. Here it is." [Pg 314]

Bertha hastily opened a small packet which she held in her hand and produced a manuscript.

"Look at it," she said; "read the opening sentence. I am not in the slightest hurry; take your own time, but read, if you will, the first page. If the style is not the style of the old stories, if the matter is not equal in merit to the stories already published, then I will own to you that I came here on a false errand and will ask you to forgive me."

Franks, with still that strange sense of being mesmerized, received the manuscript from Bertha's long slim hand. He sank into his office chair and listlessly turned the pages.

He read a sentence or two and then looked up at the clock.

"I have wired to Miss Aylmer to expect me at twelve: it is past that hour now. I really must ask you to pardon me."

"Miss Aylmer will not be in. Miss Aylmer has left Prince's Mansions. I happened to call there and know what I am saying. Will you go on reading? You want your story. I believe your printers are waiting for it even now."

Franks fidgeted impatiently. Once again his eyes lit upon the page. As he read, Bertha's own eyes devoured his face. She knew each word of that first page. She had taken special and extra pains with it; it represented her best, her very best; it was strong, perfect in style, and her treatment of her subject was original; there was a note of passion and pathos, there was a deep undercurrent of human feeling in her words. Franks read to the end. [Pg 315]

If he turned the page Bertha felt that her victory would be won—if he closed the manuscript she had still to fight her battle. Her heart beat quickly. She wondered what the Fates had in store for her.

Franks at last came to the final word; he hesitated, half looked up, then his fingers trembled. He turned the page. Bertha saw by the look on his face that he had absolutely forgotten her. She gave a brief sigh: the time of tension was over, the victory was won. She rose and approached him.

"I can take that to another house," she said.

"No, no," said Franks; "there is stuff in this. It is quite up to the usual mark. So Florence gave it to you to bring to me. Now, you know, I do not quite like the tone nor does my chief; but the talent is unmistakable."

"You will publish it, then?"

"Certainly. I see it is the usual length. If you will pardon me, as things are pressing, I will ring and give this to the printers."

"One moment first. You think that manuscript has been written by Florence Aylmer?"

"Why not? Of course it has!" He looked uneasily from the paper in his hand to the girl who stood before him. "What do you mean?"

"I have something to tell you. You may be angry with me, but I do not much care. *I* possess the genius, not Florence Aylmer; *I* am the writer of that story. Florence Aylmer wrote one thing for you, a schoolgirl essay, which you returned. I wrote the papers which the public liked; *I* wrote the stories which the public devoured. I am the woman of genius; I am the ghost behind Florence Aylmer; I am the real author. You can give up the false: the real has come to you at last." [Pg 316]

"You must be telling me an untruth," said Franks. He staggered back, his face became green, his eyes flashed angrily.

"I am telling you the truth; you have but to ask Florence herself. Has she not broken off her engagement with you?"

"She has, and a good thing, too," he muttered under his breath.

"Ah! I heard those words, though you said them so low, and it is a good thing for you. You would never have been happy with a girl like Florence. I know her well. I don't pretend that I played a very nice part; but still I am not ashamed. I want money now; I did not want money when I offered my productions to Florence. I hoped that I should be a very rich woman. My hopes have fallen to the ground; therefore I take back that talent with which Nature has endowed me. You can give *me* orders for the *Argonaut* in the future. You will kindly pay *me* for that story. Now I think I have said what I meant to say, and I wish you good-morning."

"But you must stay a moment, Miss—I really forget your name."

"My name is Keys—Bertha Keys. Other well-known magazines will pay me for all I can write for them; but I am willing to give you the *whole* of my writings, say for three months, if you are willing to pay me according to my own ideas."

"What are those?"

"You must double your pay to me. You can, if you like, publish this little story about Florence and myself in some of your society gossip—I do not mind at all—or you can keep it quiet. You have but to say in one of your issues that the *nom de plume* under which your talented author wrote is, for reasons of her own, changed. You can give me a fresh title. The world will suspect mystery and run after me more than ever. I think that is the principal thing I have to say to you. Now, may I wish you good-morning?" [Pg 317]

Bertha rose as she spoke, dropped a light mocking curtsey in Franks's direction, and let herself out of the room before he had time to realize that she was leaving.

CHAPTER XLVII. [Pg 318]

FINIS.

It is, alas! true in this world that often the machinations of the wicked prosper. By all the laws of morality Bertha Keys ought to have come to condign punishment; she ought to have gone under; she ought to have disappeared from society; she ought to have been hooted and disliked wherever she showed her face.

These things were by no means the case, however. Bertha, playing a daring game, once more achieved success.

By means of threatening to take her work elsewhere she secured admirable terms for her writing—quite double those which had been given to poor Florence. She lived in the best rooms in Prince's Mansions, and before a year had quite expired she was engaged to Tom Franks. He married her, and report whispers that they are by no means a contented couple. It is known that Franks is cowed, and at home at least obeys his wife. Bertha rules with a rod of iron; but perhaps she is not happy, and perhaps her true punishment for her misdeeds has begun long ago.

Meanwhile Florence, released from the dread of discovery, her conscience once more relieved from its burden of misery, bloomed out into happiness, and also into success. [Pg 319]

Florence wrote weekly to Trevor, and Trevor wrote to her, and his love for her grew as the days and weeks went by. The couple had to wait some time before they could really marry, but during that time Florence learned some of the best lessons in life. She was soon able to support herself, for she turned out, contrary to her expectations, a very excellent teacher. She avoided Tom Franks and his wife, and could not bear to hear the name of the *Argonaut* mentioned. For a time, indeed, she took a dislike to all magazines, and only read the special books which Mrs. Trevor indicated.

Kitty Sharston was also her best friend during this time of humiliation and training, and when the hour at last arrived when she was to join Trevor, Kitty said to her father that she scarcely knew her old friend, so courageous was the light that shone in Florence's eyes, and so happy and beaming was her smile.

"I have gone down into the depths," she said to Kitty, on the day when she sailed for Australia; "it

is a very good thing sometimes to see one's self just down to the very bottom. I have done that, and oh! I hope, I do hope that I shall not fall again."

As to Mrs. Trevor, she also had a last word with Kitty.

"There was a time, my dear," she said, "when knowing all that had happened in the past, I was rather nervous as to what kind of wife my dear son would have in Florence Aylmer, but she is indeed now a daughter after my own heart—brave, steadfast, earnest."

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33 Young Mutineer, The

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