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A MERE CHANCE.

A NOVEL.

BY

ADA CAMBRIDGE,

AUTHOR OF "IN TWO YEARS TIME," &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. I.

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CONTENTS OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

A MERE CHANCE.

[1]

CHAPTER I.

A MARSHAL NEIL ROSE.

A few years ago there was a young *débutante* in Melbourne whose name was Rachel Fetherstonhaugh. She had risen upon the social horizon suddenly, like a new star—or, one might almost say, like a comet, so unusually bright was she, and so much talked about; and no one quite knew where she had come from. Mrs. Hardy had introduced [2] her as her niece—everyone knew that—but there were sceptics who, having never heard of female relatives previously (except the three daughters, who had married so well), declared that she might be "anybody," picked up merely for matchmaking purposes—it being well understood that Mrs. Hardy had for an unknown period sustained life, figuratively speaking, upon the stimulus of matrimonial intrigues, and had now no more daughters to provide for.

That this pretty creature had been unseen and unsuspected until the last Miss Hardy, as Mrs. Buxton, was fairly away on her honeymoon, and almost immediately after had been introduced to society as Mrs. Buxton's successor, was a kind of circumstance that seemed, of course, bound to [3] have a mystery at the bottom of it. But, as a matter of fact, there was no mystery. Rachel Fetherstonhaugh was a *bona-fide* niece, and her entrance into the Hardy family at a particular juncture could be quite easily accounted for.

Her father had been Mrs. Hardy's brother—a good-for-nothing, unlucky brother, whose clever brains could do anything but earn money, and whose pockets could no more hold it than a sieve could hold water—a brother whom, long ago, before she had become rich and fastidious, Mrs. Hardy had loved, and served, and worked for, but whom, of late years, she had—with some mild self-reproach for doing so—ignored as far as possible.

This man had married a girl without a penny, as such a man was certain to do; and his wife had [4] left him a widower, with an only child, a few years afterwards. Since then, for fifteen years, he had rambled about from place to place, seeking his fortune in all kinds of visionary and impracticable schemes, whose collapse one after the other, never deterred him from fresh enterprises, until a sunstroke closed the list of his life's many failures at the early age of forty-five.

A formal little note was sent by his orphan daughter to Mrs. Hardy to announce this sad event; and for half an hour after receiving it the bereaved sister was inconsolable, tormenting herself with unavailing regrets for her neglect of "her own flesh and blood," and with harrowing reminiscences of loving early years. [5]

At the end of that time, however, she had made many generous plans for her dead brother's child, which cheered and comforted her; and in time these gave place to the prudent, unemotional dictates of worldly wisdom. Mrs. Hardy dried her tears, bought herself a black bonnet, and stole out of town in a surreptitious fashion, to see what manner of niece had been thrown upon her hands.

She pictured to herself what the child's life had probably been—the motherless child of a vagabond speculator, who had lived very indifferently by his wits; and the most she hoped for was to find her a raw bush girl, rudimentally educated, and uncontaminated by the low society in which she had been brought up. For such a niece she had mapped out what seemed to be a suitable career—that of a nursery governess in some *distant* colony; and she had resolved to be a good friend to the girl, to set her up in clothes, and to see that she never came to want or misfortune if by any reasonable means it could be helped. [6]

To her intense surprise her young relative turned out to be a remarkably pretty and refined young woman, obviously accustomed to the decorous and reticent poverty of people who had "seen better days" and appreciated the fact, and not raw in any sort of sense, though diffident and shy; the kind of young woman, indeed, who, it was evident at a glance, was capable under good management of bringing honour and glory upon the family. [7]

The result was as above indicated. Rachel Fetherstonhaugh, instead of being sent into obscurity to earn her bread, was adopted in the sight of all men as a daughter of the house—that great white house at Toorak, which had achieved local fame for its profuse entertainments, its social diplomacies, and its three great marriages.

Her father's debts were paid; her wardrobe was supplemented with the very best style of new clothes—less expensive, but more becoming, than any that Mrs. Buxton and Mrs. Buxton's sisters had worn; and by and bye when, having got over the first shock and grief of her father's death, she made her appearance in public, and began to take an interest in her new life, she found herself, to her great astonishment, a personage—if not *the* personage—in the society around her. [8]

It must be said, and not to her discredit, I hope, that Miss Fetherstonhaugh liked being a personage very much indeed. She had grown up a sensitive little gentlewoman, full of delicate thoughts and tastes, in the midst of dull, uncultured people of sordid cares and occupations, and of uncongenial surroundings of all sorts; and the mere physical enjoyment of her changed circumstances, in which everything was orderly, and dainty, and plenteous, and "nice," was something like the enjoyment that a flower must feel when the sun shines.

And the sudden discovery that certain shy conjectures about her personal appearance (which she had hardly had leisure or heart to attend to) were confirmed by the best authority—to know herself a pretty girl, and to see that society paid her homage accordingly—this was an experience that no woman born, being in possession of her faculties, could help delighting in. And having all the grateful consciousness of the value of life and its good things that nature gives to the young and healthy, unspoiled by artificial sentiment, her delight was unbounded, and consequently unconcealed. [9]

Rachel Fetherstonhaugh was, as her uncle said, "A modest, good girl, with no nonsense about her." All the same, she was proud and glad of her fair, clear-cut features, and her pensive, large, sweet eyes that were full of tender suggestions, for which no authority existed when she lifted them meekly to an admirer's face; and that figure which with all its slenderness had the curves of beauty everywhere, and those waves of ruddy auburn hair. [10]

"I am so glad I am not plain," she once said to her cousin, Mrs. Thornley (who strange to say did not repeat the remark to all her friends with disparaging comments, but responded confidentially with a sympathising kiss, and said she could quite understand it). "I have always thought that it must be the most charming thing in the world to be a really pretty woman. And now I know it."

On a grey afternoon in the beginning of May this young lady was enjoying the luxury of a slow drive up and down Collins Street, shopping with her aunt. She nestled in a soft corner of a well-appointed Victoria, with a great rug of native bearskins about her knees, showing her delicate fresh face, like a well-hung picture, to the crowd of passers-by on the pavement, and yet sitting just enough above them to see into the shop-windows over their heads; and she felt—though she did not formulate the sentiment—perfectly happy and satisfied. [11]

If the truth must be told, she found the sight of more or less well-dressed men and women, streaming up and down the busy street, more interesting than the most lovely landscape she had ever seen. She took as much pleasure in the exquisite fit of her gloves as in the exquisite colour and fragrance of a Marshal Neil rose that she wore in her button-hole; and she had never seen a moonrise or a sunset that had fascinated her *more* than that sealskin jacket in Alston and Brown's window, which she observed was exactly the size for her. It is not, therefore, to be supposed that she is a heroine unworthy of the name. [12]

At Alston and Brown's Mrs. Hardy stepped out of her carriage for perhaps the fifth time. She was a very large, masculine kind of woman, with a remarkably fine Roman nose, of which she was

excessively proud, and justly, for it had been a valuable weapon to her in the battle of life, literally carrying all before it. When he had got over the effect of her nose, the beholder of Mrs. Hardy's person, as a rule, was pleasantly impressed by it. It had a generous and a regal air. [13]

"My dear," she said to her young companion, "I only want to match some lace. Will you go in with me, or will you stay where you are?"

"I think I will stay, if you please, aunt," replied Rachel. "The carriage is so comfortable, and I like to look at the street."

"Don't look too much," said Mrs. Hardy, smiling anxiously. "There are all kinds of office clerks and people mixed up with the crowd at this hour."

"I don't want to look at *men*," said Miss Fetherstonhaugh, with more dignity than one would have given her credit for. "It is the ladies' dresses I like to see—and the horses."

Mrs. Hardy marched into the shop with that imposing mien which became more and more pronounced as she grew older and stouter, and her social successes accumulated; and her niece sat still in her corner, and looked for a long while at the sealskin jacket. [14]

"All my cousins have sealskin jackets," she mused, "but I don't think they had them until they were married. Perhaps I shall have one when I am married. I can't expect my aunt to buy me one, of course; she has bought me so many pretty things. How lovely and soft that brown fur is! How well it would suit my complexion! If my husband is rich, and asks me what I should like for my first birthday present, I shall not have any difficulty in making up my mind. I wonder *will* he be rich? like Mr. Thornley, and Mr. Buxton, and Mr. Reade. At any rate, he must not be poor; if he is, I won't have him. I know enough of poverty"—with a little shudder and a sudden solemnity in her face—"and I don't mean to run into it again if I can help it." [15]

Here she fell into a rather mournful reverie, thinking of her old life, with its shifts and privations —of her poor father, who had been so happy through it all, never feeling the weight of the petty debts and dishonours that lay like lead on her—of her struggles to keep his affairs straight—of her prayers that she might not live to despise and desert him, which was a temptation that grew with her growing years—and as she thought, she gazed absently, tenderly, pensively, not on the sealskin jacket, but on the faces of the passers-by. She had no idea how excessively interesting and pretty she looked to those passers-by with that expression in her eyes. [16]

However, a gentleman came by presently, a well-preserved young man of fifty or sixty, with a waxed moustache, and a slender umbrella carried musketwise over his shoulder; and his attention was violently arrested.

"Where *have* I seen that charming creature?" he asked himself, imploring his memory, which had a great store of miscellaneous treasures, to be quick and help him. "Surely I have been introduced to her somewhere. Oh, of course! it is old Hardy's niece, or ward, or whatever she is. Good day, Miss Fetherstonhaugh," turning back when he had nearly passed her, and making a profound obeisance with his hat off. "Fine afternoon for a drive." [17]

She recognised *him* immediately. She had danced a quadrille with him at her memorable first evening "out," and she had learned a great deal of him since from the gossip of her aunt's circle. There was a time, she had been told, when he was nearly becoming a member of the family himself. He was a great merchant—or an ex-merchant rather—who had dealt in some mysterious commodity that had brought enormous profits; and he had risen by all kinds of good luck, from no one knew what depth of social insignificance to the proud position of a man of fashion about town, whom ladies delighted to honour. [18]

"Good day, Mr. Kingston," she responded, looking very pink and bright, and a little flurried as she returned his salutation. She had the daintiest complexion that ever adorned a youthful face, and whenever she was startled or embarrassed, however slightly, she blushed like a rose. Mr. Kingston, accustomed to appraise the charms of his female friends with an almost brutal impartiality, was unjustifiably touched and flattered by this innocent demonstration. He was really very glad he had remembered who she was before he had lost so good an opportunity for looking at and talking to her.

"I don't think it *is* a very fine afternoon," she remarked presently, as the gentleman seemed to find himself for once a little at a loss for a subject; and she smiled at him through her blushes, which went and came suddenly and delicately, as if they were breathed over her by the air somehow. "It has been looking grey, like rain, ever since we started; and it is rather cold, don't you think?" [19]

"Is it? Ah! so it is. But we must expect cold weather in May. I suppose it is rather strange to you to be finding winter coming on at this season?"

"No. Why should it be strange to me?"

"I thought—I am sure somebody told me—that you were recently out from England."

"Oh, dear, no," she replied, frankly. "I was born in this colony, and have lived in it all my life." [20]

"In the name of fortune, where?"

"In different places; at Sandhurst, at Ballarat, and on the Upper Murray, and in little townships

here and there in the bush; and sometimes in Melbourne."

"I am sure I never saw you in Melbourne until I met you at that dance the other night," he protested earnestly. "I never should have forgotten your face if I had once seen it."

"I daresay not," she said, and she was angry to find herself blushing again. "I was but a child when I lived in Melbourne before, and—and my home was not in Toorak then."

Mr. Kingston understood. She had been a poor relation in those days, and the Misses Hardy were [21]
unmarried. He had a constitutional antipathy to poor relations, and he was a little disappointed. For a few seconds he kept silence, while he wondered what her antecedents could have been. Then he looked at her again, and she was regarding him with a curious gravity of demeanour, almost as if she had divined his thoughts. There was a meek majesty about her that commanded his respect, and that he considered was excessively becoming.

After all, what did it matter about her antecedents? Did she not look a thoroughly well-bred little woman, sitting there in her furs and soft cushions, with her head held so straight? Did he not hear other men—better men than he from a genealogical point of view—singing her praises [22]
wherever he went? Whatever she had been, she was a distinguished personage now, whose acquaintance it behoved a veteran lady-killer to cultivate, and that without delay.

"I am very glad your home is in Toorak now," he said gallantly. "I have some land there myself, quite close to your uncle's place."

"Indeed," murmured Rachel.

"Yes, and I am going to build on it soon. I have just got the plans out from home—capital plans. I shall bring them in for Mrs. Hardy's opinion. When my house is built we shall be neighbours. You will have to help me, you and your aunt, with the furnishing and all that sort of thing that ladies understand."

"I don't think I understand much about it," she said; "but I shall like to see it done. I am very fond [23]
of pretty furniture. Will your house be very big?"

"Oh, nothing out of the way. I'm not going to spend *more* than twenty thousand pounds on it. My friends tell me I ought to do the thing properly when I am about it; but I don't see the fun of locking up a lot of money in bricks and mortar. I might want to change my residence any day, you see."

Rachel looked at him with awe. There was a flippancy in the way he spoke of that twenty thousand pounds which almost shocked her.

"If you are going to build a palace," she said, "don't talk of asking my help. I have never had [24]
anything to do with that kind of thing."

"Oh, my dear Miss Fetherstonhaugh—really it will be nothing but an ordinary good-sized, comfortable house, and I am sure your taste would be perfect. At any rate, you will help me with the gardens? I mean to have good grounds, whatever else I go without; and ladies always know how to lay out beds and things better than we do."

"*I* shouldn't know," she said, smiling; "but I think my aunt is very clever at that. We have beautiful flowers—even so late as this."

"So I see." He glanced admiringly at the rose on her breast, and she stuck her pretty chin into her throat and looked at it too. "What a lovely bud that is! Marshal Neil, is it not? Oh, don't take it [25]
out—the black fur on your jacket makes such a charming background for it."

Rachel already had it in her hand, and was stroking the velvety yellow petals and the dark green leaves.

"We have plenty of them," she said; "there is a wonderful autumn bloom of roses just now. This is a picture, isn't it? with that deep colour like an apricot in the heart, and those scarlet stains streaking it outside. Would you like to have it?" And she held it out with a frank gesture and the most captivating smile; and then, as he took it with a low bow and much ostentatious gratitude, she blushed the deepest crimson to the roots of her golden hair.

At this moment Mrs. Hardy emerged from the shop, her ounce-weight of purchases being carried [26]
behind her; and Mr. Kingston turned to receive an effusive greeting.

"Oh, my dear Mr. Kingston, is it you?" the stately matron exclaimed. "How *glad* I am to see you—I have not met you for an age! Where *have* you been? And when *are* you coming to call on me again?"

"I will come whenever you will allow me," this illustrious person replied, with an alacrity of demeanour that did not escape notice. "I thought of coming this afternoon, and on my way I saw your carriage, and your niece told me that you were shopping."

"No; I did not tell you that," interposed Rachel gravely.

He looked at her and laughed, and his laugh for some unaccountable reason called her retreating [27]
blushes back. Mrs. Hardy glanced sharply from one to the other, and then she also laughed, in decorous matronly fashion.

"Well, come and dine with us to-night," the elder lady said, "and take us to the opera. That would be a friendly thing to do, if you are disposed to be friendly. Beatrice and Mr. Reade are coming—nobody else; and you can take Mr. Hardy's ticket. He is always glad to get off going."

"I will indeed—I will with pleasure," was the prompt response; and with some further exchange of civilities, the friends separated.

Mr. Kingston walked away to his club, with his flower in his button-hole, swinging his umbrella gently, and wondering to what class of woman this pretty Miss Fetherstonhaugh belonged. [28]

"Is she a coquette?" he asked himself over and over again; "or is she charmingly fresh and simple?"

Mrs. Hardy rolled home in her little Victoria, and she also asked herself questions which were by no means easy to answer, as she stole furtive glances at the little black figure sitting, watchful and alert, beside her.

"My dear," she said presently, breaking a long silence, "where is your rosebud gone to?"

"I gave it to Mr. Kingston, aunt."

"You gave it to Mr. Kingston!" Mrs. Hardy almost shouted in the vehemence of her surprise. Then, pausing for a moment while she stared, not unkindly, at the torrent of blushes that flowed over her pretty face, she ejaculated, almost in a tone of awe, "Good gracious!" [29]

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[30]

CHAPTER II.

FAMILY COUNSELS.

THE drawing-room of the house in Toorak where our heroine lived, looked very cosy and comfortable a few hours later in the ruddy glow of the firelight. It was a little before the days of domestic high art in Victoria, and it was by no means the charming apartment that it is now. There was no dado, no parquetry floor, no tiled hearth, no *étagère* mantelpiece—nor Persian rugs under foot, nor Limoges plaques and Benares dishes on the walls, nor Japanese screens and jars, nor treasures of jade and china, nor anything, in fact, that there ought to have been. [31]

The pleasant firelight danced upon a whitewashed ceiling, plentifully adorned with plaster-of-Paris mouldings, and upon whitey-grey walls sprigged with golden flowers. The floor was completely covered with a vivid green carpet, also sprinkled with flowers; and the windows were draped with brilliant damask to match, depending from immense gilt cornices in festoons looped with cords and tassels. There was a cut-glass chandelier hanging down in the middle, and there was a gigantic pier-glass reaching from the marble chimney-piece to the plaster-of-Paris frieze, with little gold cupids sitting on the top of it, tying wreaths of gold flowers into a knot. The chairs and couches shone in slippery satin, with wonderful rosewood convolutions wriggling out from them, that one could hardly venture to call legs; and there was a terrible chiffonniere, full of looking-glasses, with a marble top, reflecting all these splendours over and over again—which was quite unnecessary. [32]

Nevertheless, though Mrs. Hardy cannot look back upon it without a shudder, the old room was a pleasant room. She herself came into it on this occasion, having dressed a little earlier than usual, and was struck by its air of luxurious warmth and comfort. She saw nothing to shock her artistic susceptibilities; she liked the twinkle of her glass drops, and the shine of her spacious [33] mirror, and the deep glow of her emerald satin and damask—though she would die sooner than own to it now.

She went leisurely over to the fire, sank down in a low arm-chair, and put up her feet on the fender to warm, with a distinct impression upon her mind of congenial surroundings and satisfied aspirations. Long ago she had been a poor man's wife—the most estimable and devoted of poor men's wives—doing her own housework, making her own bread and butter, nursing her own babies, mending her husband's clothes; and in those days she had beautified her bush hut with cheap paper and chintz, and thought it prettier than a palace.

Later on she had had a smart brick and stucco cottage, and in it a drawing-room—her first [34] drawing-room—with a green and scarlet drugget on the floor, lace curtains over the window, a centre table (with a basket of wax flowers under a shade in the middle), and a "suite" in green rep disposed around; and this in its day had seemed to her an apartment quite too good for common use. Next she had aspired to a Brussels carpet, and by and bye to a pier-glass and a piano. And so she had come by degrees to this Toorak splendour, in each stage feeling that she had reached the summit of her ambition, and vindicated her claim to the most correct taste.

The same process of evolution and development had taken place in herself, outwardly and inwardly. She was naturally a kindly, honest, good-hearted woman, and she was by birth a lady. [35] But year by year nature having much to struggle with had retired, step by step into the background of her personality, and she was simply what the education of society—her society—made her. Practically, fashion and *les convenances* were her gods. Those men or women who were not what she generally termed "well-bred"—who were behind the times in social matters, who had no place in her great world, nor any capacity for making one—were not people to be received into her house, or to have anything to do with. Her demeanour to such unfortunate individuals, when she did happen to come into contact with them was, to say the least, chilling.

Yet those who knew her best, declared that if any of these ineligibles were to fall into great [36] trouble, she would be the first to help and befriend them if she could; and that if her husband were to lose his fortune and suddenly plunge her into poverty again, she would set to work to cook his dinners and mend his clothes with the same cheerful willingness as of yore.

She sat in the warm firelight, toasting her feet, and her brain was busy with projects. For some weeks past she had been troubled about her young niece, on account of her too absurd innocence, and her ignorance of social etiquette in many important details. The girl's manner and carriage had been particularly easy and graceful, but she had constantly counteracted the effect [37] of this by a deplorable want of penetration as to who was who, and of reticence concerning her own history and experiences, which had been very mortifying to an aunt and *chaperon* accustomed to better things; and her efforts to teach and train one who seemed so gentle and pliant had been singularly unfruitful. Rachel was a sweet child, and she was fond of her, and proud of her beauty; nevertheless, she had declared to herself and to Beatrice more than once, that she had never known a human creature so hopelessly dense and stupid.

To-night, however, she took another view of the case. That rural freshness had possibly found favour in the eyes of Mr. Kingston, who had been the ideal son-in-law to so many mothers of so [38] many polished daughters. She was surprised, but she could understand it. For she knew that men had all sorts of queer, independent, unaccountable ways of looking at things—at women in particular; and she had already noticed that they liked those ridiculous blushes—which to her mind showed a painful want of culture and self-possession—in which the girl indulged so freely.

What if she should be able to marry her to Mr. Kingston—who had foiled the artifices of well-meaning matrons, and resisted the fascinations of charming maidens exactly suited for him for so many years—after marrying all her own children so well? That was the theme of her meditations, and she found it deeply interesting. She longed for the arrival of Beatrice, who was her eldest [39] daughter and her chief *confidante* and adviser, to hear what she had to say about it.

She had been by herself about ten minutes, during which time a servant had lit up the cut-glass chandelier, when there was a ring at the door-bell, and Mr. and Mrs. Reade were ushered in. Mrs. Reade was a tiny little dark woman, with a bright and clever, though by no means pretty, face, in which no trace of the maternal features was visible.

She was beautifully dressed in palest pink, with crimson roses in her hair, and delicate lace of great value about her tight skirt and her narrow shoulders; and her distinguished appearance generally rejoiced her mother's heart. Behind her towered her enormous husband, in whom blue [40] blood declined to manifest itself in the customary way. He was an amiable, slow-witted, honest gentleman, with a large, weak face, rather coarse and red, particularly towards bedtime, and heavy and awkward manners; and he was as wax in the hands of the small person who owned him.

"Ned," she said, looking back at him as she swept across the room, "you go and find papa, and let mamma and me have a talk until the others come in."

Ned obediently went—not to find his host, who was probably in the dressing-room, but to read "The Argus" by the dining-room fire, while the servants set the table. And the mother and

daughter sat down together to one of the confidential gossips that they loved. Mrs. Reade began [41]
to unfold her little budget of news and scandal, but immediately laid it by—to be resumed between the acts of the opera presently—while she listened to Mrs. Hardy's account of the transactions of the afternoon. It did not take that experienced matron long to explain herself, and the younger lady was quick to grasp the situation. At first she was inclined to scoff.

"Oh, we all know Mr. Kingston, mamma. He dangles after every fresh face, but he never means anything. *He* will never marry—at any rate, not until he is too old to flirt any more."

"But, my dear, he is going to build his house."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Mrs. Reade. "He has been going to build that house ever since I [42]
can remember. It is just one of his artful devices. Whenever he wants to make a girl like him he tells her about that house—just to set her longing to be the mistress of it. That is the only use he will ever put it to. You'll see he will tell Rachel all about it to-night. He will beg her to help him with her exquisite taste, and so on. Oh, I know his ways. But he means nothing."

"He has already told Rachel," said Mrs. Hardy, laughing. "And, what is more, he is going to bring the designs to show her, and he says he is really going to put the work in hand at once."

"If so," said Mrs. Reade, gazing into the fire meditatively, "it looks as if he had been proposing to [43]
settle himself—though I shall not believe it till I see it. But then he must have made his plans before he ever saw Rachel. It must be Sarah Brownlow he is thinking of, mamma."

"Sarah Brownlow passed him this afternoon, Beatrice, and he hardly noticed her. While as for Rachel—well, I only wish you had been there to see the way he looked at her, and the way he said good-bye. My impression is that he thinks it is time to settle—as indeed it is, goodness knows—and so has begun with his house; and that he is looking about for a mistress for it, and that something in Rachel has struck him. I am certain he is struck with Rachel."

Mrs. Reade gazed into the fire gravely, while she pondered over this solemn announcement. [44]

"It is possible," she said presently. "It is quite possible. All the men are saying that she is the prettiest girl in Melbourne just now. An elderly club man, who has seen much of the world, is very likely to admire that kind of childish, simple creature. If it should be so," she continued, musingly, "I wonder how Rachel will take it."

"Rachel," said Mrs. Hardy, with sudden energy, "is not so simple as she seems. You mark my words, she will be as keen to make a good marriage as anybody as soon as she gets the chance."

"Do you think so?" her daughter responded, looking up with her bright, quick eyes. "Now that is [45]
not at all my notion of her."

"Nor was it mine at first, but I am getting new lights. It never does to trust to that demure kind of shy manner. I assure you she made such use of her opportunities this afternoon as surprised me, who am not easily surprised. In about ten minutes—I could not have been in Alston's more than ten minutes—they were on the most frank and friendly terms possible, and she had given him a rose to wear in his button-hole."

"Nonsense!"

"I assure you, yes. And I know, by the look of him, that he never saw through it. It is wonderful
how even the cleverest men can be taken in by that *ingénue* manner. He evidently thought her a [46]
sweet and unsophisticated child. Sweet she is—the most amiable little creature I ever knew; but she knows what she is about perfectly well."

Mrs. Reade gazed into the fire again with thoughtful eyes; then after a pause she said:

"I think you don't understand her, mamma. I think she really saw no more in Mr. Kingston than she would have seen in any poor young man without a penny."

"No, Beatrice. She talked about his new house, and all the money he was going to spend on it, in a ridiculous way. She was completely fascinated by the subject."

"I can't imagine little Rachel scheming to catch a rich husband," the young lady exclaimed, with a [47]
mocking, but pleasant laugh.

"You don't see as much of her as I do, my dear Beatrice," her mother replied, with dignity. "If you did, you would know that she is as fond of money and luxury as any hardened woman of the world could be. She quite fondles the ornaments I have put in her room. She goes into raptures over the silver and china. A new dress sends her into ecstacies. She annoys me sometimes—showing people so plainly that she has never been used to anything nice. However, it will make it easier for me to settle her than I at first thought it would be. It will be all plain sailing with Mr. Kingston, you will see."

"Mother," said Mrs. Reade—she only said "mother" when she was very much in earnest—"let me [48]
give you a word of advice. If you want to marry Rachel to Mr. Kingston—and I hope you will, for it would be a capital match—don't let her know anything about it; don't do anything to help it on; don't let her see what is coming—leave them both alone. I think I know her better than you do, and I have a pretty good idea of Mr. Kingston; and any sort of interference with either of them would be most injudicious—most dangerous. I shall see to-night—I'm sure I shall see in a moment ——"

There was a ring at the door-bell, and the stir of an arrival in the hall, and the little woman did not finish what she wanted to say. She rose from her chair, and shook out her pink train; and the mother to whom she had laid down the law rose also, looking very majestic. [49]

"Mr. Kingston," said the servant, throwing the drawing-room door open.

The great man entered with a springing step, bowing elaborately. His glossy hair (some people said it was a wig, but it was not) was curled to perfection; his moustaches were waxed to the finest needle-points; he wore flashing diamond studs on an embroidered shirt front; and there was a Marshal Neil rose in his button-hole, not very fresh, and too much blown to be any ornament to a fine gentleman's evening toilet, hanging its yellow head heavily from a weak and flabby stalk.

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[50]

CHAPTER III.

MR. KINGSTON'S QUESTION.

WHILE her aunt and cousin were discussing her downstairs, Miss Fetherstonhaugh was dressing herself for dinner in her little chamber at the top of the house. This was a part of the daily ceremonial of her new life, in which she took a deep and delighted interest. The whole thing, in fact, was charming to her. To come sweeping down the big staircase in dainty raiment, all in the spacious light and warmth—to have the doors [51] held open for her as she passed in and out—to go into the dining-room on her uncle's arm, and sit at dinner with flowers before her—seeing and feeling nothing but softness and colour, and polish and order everywhere—was at this time to realise her highest conception of earthly enjoyment.

Her bedroom was not magnificent, but it had everything in it that she most desired—the whitest linen, the freshest chintz and muslin, a fire to dress by, an easy chair, and above all, a cheval glass, in which she could survey her pretty figure from head to foot. She stood before this cheval glass to-night a thoroughly happy little person. Hitherto, with a mirror twelve inches by nine, that had a crack across it, she had seen that her face was fair and fresh, and that her hair had a [52] wonderful red-gold lustre where the light fell upon it; but she was only now coming to understand what perfection of shape and grace had developed with her recent growth into womanhood, to make the *tout ensemble* charming.

She looked at herself with deep content—no doubt with a stronger interest than she would have looked at any other lovely woman, but in much the same spirit, enjoying her beauty more for its own sake than for what it would do for her—more because it harmonised herself to her tastes and circumstances, than because it was a great arsenal of ammunition for social warfare and conquest.

She was still in mourning for her father, and had put on a simple black evening dress. Her [53] natural sense of the becoming dictated simple costumes, but education demanded that they should be made in the latest fashion; and she regarded the tightness of her skirt in front, and the fan of her train behind, with something more than complacency.

As yet the lust for jewels had not awakened in her, which was very fortunate, for she had none. The tender, milky throat and the round white arms were bare; and all the ornament that she wore, or wanted, was a bouquet of white chrysanthemum and scarlet salvia on her bosom, and another in her hair.

Pretty Rachel Fetherstonhaugh! If Roden Dalrymple could have seen her that night, only for five [54] minutes, what a deal of trouble she might have been spared!

The dinner bell rang, and she blew out her candles hurriedly, and flitted downstairs. On the landing below her she joined her uncle—a small, thin, sharp-faced person, with wiry grey hair, and "man of business" written in every line of his face—as he left his own apartment; and they descended in haste together to the drawing-room, where four people were solemnly awaiting them.

The first thing that Rachel saw when she entered was her Marshal Neil rose. She glanced from that to its wearer's face, eagerly turned to meet her, full of admiring interest; and, as a matter of course, she blushed to a hue that put her scarlet salvias to shame. [55]

Why she blushed she would have been at a loss to say; certainly not for any of the reasons that the assembled spectators supposed. It was merely from the vaguest sense of embarrassment at being in a position which she had not been trained to understand.

An hour or two before, her aunt had made that rose the text of a discourse in which many strange things had been suggested, but nothing explained; and now they all looked at her, evidently with reference to it, yet with painful ambiguity that perplexed her and made her uneasy; and she could only feel, in a general way, that she was young and ignorant and not equal to the situation. Much less than that was amply sufficient to cover her with a veil of blushes. [56]

At dinner she sat between Mr. Reade and her uncle, and, being on the best of terms with both of them, she confined her conversation to her own corner of the table, and scarcely lifted her eyes; but when dinner was over—dinner and coffee, and the drive to the opera-house—then Mr. Kingston, deeply interested in his supposed discovery of a new kind of woman, and piqued by her shy reception of his generally much-appreciated attentions, set himself to improve his acquaintance with her, and found the task easy. They were standing on the pavement, in the glare of the gaslight, with a lounging crowd about them.

Mrs. Hardy had dropped a bracelet, for which she and her son-in-law were hunting in the bottom of the brougham, and Mrs. Reade was chatting to an acquaintance, whose hansom had just deposited him beside her—a bearded young squatter, enjoying his season in town after selling his wool high, who stared very hard at Rachel through a pair of good glasses, as soon as he had a favourable opportunity. [57]

Mr. Kingston stood by the girl's side, staring at her without disguise. The shadow of the street fell soft upon her gauzy raiment and her white arms and the lustre of her auburn hair, but her face was turned towards the gaslight—she was looking wistfully up the long passage which had something very like fairy land at the end of it—and he thought he had never seen any face so fresh and sweet. [58]

"You like this kind of thing, don't you?" he said, gently, as if speaking to a child, when in turning to look for her aunt she caught his eye.

"Oh, yes," she replied, promptly, "I do, indeed! I like the whole thing; not the singing and the acting only, but the place, and the people, and the ladies' dresses, and the noise, and the moving about, and the lights—everything. I should like to come to the opera every night—except the nights when there are balls."

Mr. Kingston laughed, and said he should never have guessed from what he had seen of her that she was such a very gay young lady.

"You don't understand," she responded quickly, looking up at him with earnest, candid eyes; "it is not that I am gay—oh, no, I don't think it is that! though perhaps I do enjoy a spectacle more than many people. But it is all so new and strange. I have never had any sightseeing—any pleasure like what I am having now, that is why I find it so delightful." [59]

"Come, my dear!" cried Mrs. Hardy sharply (she had found her bracelet and overheard a part of this little dialogue), "don't stand about in the wind with nothing over you. What have you done with your shawl?"

"It is here, aunt," replied Rachel meekly, lifting it from her arm.

Her cavalier hastened to take it from her and adjust it carefully over her shoulders. During this operation Mrs. Hardy swept into the lobby, taking the arm of her big son-in-law; and Mrs. Reade, having parted from her friend, glanced round quickly, followed her husband, and put herself also under his protection. Mr. Kingston, smiling to himself like Mephistopheles under his waxed moustache, was left with Rachel in the doorway. [60]

"How *does* it go?" he said, fumbling with a quantity of woolly fringe. "All right—there's no hurry. It is not eight o'clock yet. Pray let me do it for you."

She stood still, while he dawdled as long as he could over the arrangement of her wrap, but she cast anxious looks after the three receding figures, and she was the colour of an oleander blossom. He was a little disconcerted at her embarrassment; it amused him, but it touched him too. [61]

Poor little timid child! Who would be so mean as to take advantage of her inexperience? Not he, certainly. He gave her his arm and led her into the house, with a deferential attentiveness that did not usually mark his deportment towards young girls. On their way they were accosted by a boy holding a couple of bouquets in each hand.

"Buy a bouquet for the opera, Sir?" said he, in his sing-song voice.

Mr. Kingston paused and put his glass in his eye. They were bright little nosegays, and one of them, much superior to the other, had a fringe of maiden hair fern and a rich red rose in the middle of it. He took this from the boy's hand, and offered it to Rachel with his elaborate bow. [62]

"Permit me," he said, "to make a poor acknowledgment of my deep indebtedness to you for *this*."

And he touched the drooping petals of the Marshal Neil bud, and imagined he was paying her a delicate sentimental compliment.

If Rachel had been the most finished fine lady she could not have undeceived him more gracefully.

"Thank you," she said, simply, and she smiled for half a second.

To be sure her red rose was not redder than she was, but she held her head with a gentle air of maidenly dignity that quite counteracted the weakness of that blush.

Mr. Kingston began to suspect, with some surprise, that she was not so easy to get on with as she appeared. However, that did not lessen his interest in her by any means. [63]

"I am afraid you think I have taken a liberty," he suggested presently. What had come to him to care what a bread-and-butter miss might think? But somehow he did care.

"Oh, no," she said, "it is very kind of you. But you must not talk of being indebted to me. Flowers are not—not presents, like other things."

By this time they had reached the top of the stairs, and Mrs. Reade was sweeping out of the cloak-room, where she had been "settling" her hair, and putting a little powder on her face.

"Mamma is gone in," she said, taking the girl's hand kindly; "there are plenty of people here to-night, Rachel. You must look for a lady sitting on the right of the Governor's box, in a high velvet dress. She is one of our Melbourne beauties." [64]

So they went in and took their seats; and Rachel found herself sitting in the front tier, not very much to the left of the viceregal armchairs, and her cousin Beatrice was on one side of her and Mr. Kingston on the other.

She was perfectly contented now. She smiled at her flowers; she furled and unfurled her fan; she looked round and round the house through her glasses, whispering questions and comments to Mrs. Reade, who knew everybody and everybody's history; and it made Mrs. Hardy quite uneasy to see how thoroughly and evidently she enjoyed herself. Mr. Kingston recovered his spirits which she had damped a little while ago. [65]

He watched her face from time to time—generally when she was absorbed in watching the stage; and the more he looked, the more charming he found it. So fresh, so frank, so modest, so sweet, with those delicate womanly blushes always coming and going, and that child-like fun and brightness in her eyes. He had never been so "fetched," as he expressed it, by a pretty face before; that is to say, he did not remember that he ever had been.

It was, indeed, very seldom that he regarded a pretty face with such a serious kind of admiration. He found himself wondering how it would fare, how long it would keep its transparent innocence and candour in the atmosphere of this new world—this second-rate Hardy set, which was full of meretricious, manœuvring, gossip-loving women—with a touch of anxiety that was quite unselfish. He was sure now that she was not a coquette; he was experienced enough to know, also, that, however humble her origin and antecedents, she was a girl of thoroughly "good style;" and it would be a thousand pities, he thought, if the influence of her surroundings should spoil her. [66]

When the curtain fell and the gas was turned up, he noticed that people all round the house were turning their glasses upon her. Certainly she made a charming study from an artistic point of view. What taste she had shown in the grouping of her white chrysanthemums, and the way she had mixed in those few velvety horns of red salvia. They were colours proper to a brunette, but they seemed to accentuate the delicacy of her milky complexion and the fine shade of her red-gold hair. [67]

What a chin and throat she had! and what soft, yet strong, round arms!—white, but warm, like blush rose petals that had unfolded in the dews of dawn at summer time, against the black background of her dress. And her shape and her colour were nothing compared with the expression of utter content and happiness that shone out of her face, irradiating her youth and beauty with a tender light and sweetness that, like sunshine on a sleeping crater, gave no hint of the tragic trouble hidden away for future years. No wonder people looked at her. Of course they looked. [68]

The glasses that she had been using belonged to Mrs. Reade, and now that lady was busy with them, hunting for her numerous acquaintances. Mr. Kingston held out his own, curious to see if she would discover what attention she was receiving, and what the effect of such a discovery would be.

"Thank you," said Rachel gratefully; and she settled herself back in her seat, and proceeded to take a thorough survey of all the rank and fashion that surrounded her. For a long time she gazed attentively, shifting her glasses slowly round from left to right; and Mr. Kingston watched her, leaning an elbow on the red ridge between them, and twiddling one horn of his moustaches. [69]

He expected to see the familiar blush stealing up over the whiteness of her face and neck. But she remained, though deeply interested, quite cool and calm. Presently she dropped her hands in

her lap and drew a long breath.

"There is a lady over there," she said in a whisper, "who has something round her arm so bright that I think it must be diamonds. Do you see who I mean? When she holds up her glasses again, tell me if they are real diamonds in her bracelet." [70]

Much amused, Mr. Kingston did as he was bidden.

"Oh, yes," he said, "they are real diamonds. That lady is particularly addicted to precious stones. She walks about the street in broad day with a Sunday school in each ear, as that fellow in *Piccadilly* says. Are you like the majority of your sex—a worshipper of diamonds? I thought you did not care for jewellery."

"I do," she replied, smiling. "I don't worship jewels, but I should like to have some. I should like to have some real diamonds *very* much."

"I daresay you will have plenty some day, and very becoming they'll be to you. Not more so, though, than the flowers you are wearing to-night," he added, looking at them admiringly. [71]

Rachel touched up her ornaments with a thoughtful face.

"There is such a light about diamonds," she said musingly; "no coloured stones seem so liquid and twinkling. I don't care in the least about coloured stones. If I were very rich I would have one ring full of diamonds, to wear every day, and one necklace to wear at night—a necklace of diamond stars strung together—and perhaps a diamond bracelet. And I wouldn't care for anything else."

"Should you like to be very rich?" asked her companion, smiling to himself over these naïve confessions. He was gazing, not only into her eyes, but at her lovely throat and arms, and imagining how they would look with diamonds on them. [72]

"Yes," said Rachel. "But the great thing I wish is not to be poor. I hope—oh, I do hope—I shall never be poor any more!"

"I don't think you stand in the least danger of that," said Mr. Kingston.

"I know all about it," continued the girl gravely; "and I don't think you do, or you could not laugh or make a joke of it. You *cannot* know how much it means. *You* never have debts, of course."

"Debts? Oh, dear, yes, I do—plenty."

"Yes, but I mean debts that you can't pay—that you have to apologise for—that hang and drag about you always. I won't talk about it," she added hurriedly, with a little shiver; "it will spoil my pleasure to-night." [73]

"*Don't*," said Mr. Kingston. He did not find it a congenial topic either. "Tell me what you would do if you were rich."

"What I would do?" she murmured gently, smiling again. "Oh, all kinds of things—I would pay ready money for everything, in the first place. Then I would have a lovely house, with quantities of pictures. That is one great fault in our house at Toorak—we have no nice pictures. And I would wear black velvet dresses. And I would have a beautiful sealskin jacket. And a thorough-bred horse to ride——" [74]

"Oh, do you ride?" interposed Mr. Kingston, eagerly.

"I used to ride. I like it very much. My father gave me a beautiful mare once; but afterwards he rode a steeplechase with her, and she fell and broke her back. I can ride very well," she added, smiling and blushing. "I can jump fences without being afraid. But Uncle Hardy keeps only carriage horses, and none of the family ride."

"But you must have a horse, of course. I must speak to your uncle about it," said Mr. Kingston. "Indeed, I think I have one that would suit you admirably, and I'll lend him to you to try, with pleasure, if you'll allow me." [75]

"Oh, *will* you? Oh, *how* delightful! When will you let me try him? But I forgot—I have no habit!"

"That is a difficulty soon got over. I'll speak to your aunt," said this influential autocrat.

And here a bell rang, and the curtain rose upon a fresh scene. Mrs. Reade and her mother had had an absorbing *tête-à-tête*, and now turned to see what their charge was doing. Mr. Reade, redolent of something that was not eau de cologne, came back to his seat; and Rachel began to watch the proceedings of the prima donna, who was solemnly marching across the stage. Mr. Kingston was aware, however, that the girl's thoughts were not with the spectacle before her. She was evidently preoccupied about those promised rides. [76]

"I shall have no one to go with me," she whispered presently, in the pauses of a song.

"I shall be proud to be your escort," he whispered back. "And there will always be the groom, you know," he added, seeing the colour of the oleander blossom suddenly appear. "Do not be anxious. I will manage it all for you."

"You are *very* kind," she said, looking up into his face with that shy blush, and a charming friendliness in her eyes, "and I am very grateful to you; but please do not try to persuade Aunt

[77]

Elizabeth against her wish." And she did not say much more to him. From this point she became silent and thoughtful.

When they reached Toorak, however, Mr. Kingston redeemed his promise faithfully in his own way, and at considerable trouble to himself. Mr. and Mrs. Hardy both liked to do things, as they called it, "handsomely," but at the same time without any unnecessary expense; and neither of them could see his proposal in the light of a paying enterprise.

Rachel was driven out in the carriage daily; she appeared at all places of fashionable resort; she took abundant exercise. A riding-horse would be expensive, and so would a saddle and habit, not to speak of the addition to the stable necessities; and what would there be to show for it? But while the uncle, and still more the aunt, were delicately fencing with the proposition, Mrs. Reade [78] struck in and swept all objections away.

"Of course the child ought to ride if she has been used to riding," said this imperious small person. "You send your horse here, Mr. Kingston, and Ned shall come round and see what she can do with it." This was in the hall, where he was supposed to be saying good-night; and Rachel had gone upstairs to bed.

"Thank you, Mrs. Reade—if I may," he said, with an eager gratitude that amused himself. "I am sure it would be a great pleasure to her—and it would be so good for her health. Why don't *you* ride too? It is such splendid exercise."

"I would in a minute, if I had a figure like hers," laughed Mrs. Reade. "Mamma, we must get her a [79] good habit to set off that figure. I'll come round in the morning, and go with you to have her measured. Are you going, Mr. Kingston, without a cup of hot coffee? Good-night, then; mind you send your horse."

The servant shut the door behind him; and he went out into the solemnity of the autumn night. The wind was rustling and whispering through the shrubberies round the house; it had the scent in it of untimely violets, mingled with a faint fragrance of the distant sea.

Above, the stars were shining brilliantly; below, the teeming city lay silent in the lap of darkness, with a thousand lamplights sprinkled over it. In the foreground he could dimly see the lines of [80] gravelled paths and grassy terraces, and the gleam of great bunches of pale chrysanthemums swaying to and fro in the cool air.

"It is a splendid site," he said to himself; "but I think, if anything, mine is better."

He stood for some time, looking away over the illuminated valley to the milky streak on the horizon where in three or four hours the waters of Port Philip Bay would shine; and then he sauntered down to the lodge, and found his hansom waiting for him.

"Go up to my land there, will you?" said he, pointing his thumb over his shoulder as he got in. "I'm going to set the men on soon, and I want to have a look at it." [81]

The driver, wondering whether he had had more champagne than usual, said, "All right, Sir," and drove him the few dozen yards that intervened between Mr. Hardy's gates and the place where his own were designed to be.

In the darkness he clambered over the fence, made his way to the highest ground in the enclosure, and stood once more to look at the lamp-spangled city and the dim and distant bay.

"Yes," he said, "I am higher here. I shall get a better view." And he began to build his house in fancy—to see it towering over all his neighbours', with great white walls and colonnades, and [82] myriad windows full of lights, and lovely gardens full of flowers and fountains. "I must begin at once," he said. "I must see the contractors to-morrow. I must not put it off any longer, or I shall be an old man before I can begin to enjoy it."

And after long musing over the details of his project, he stumbled back, through saplings, and tussocks, and broken bottles, to the fence; tore his dress-coat on a nail getting over it; and subsiding into his cab, lit a cheroot, and stared intently into vacancy all the way to his club.

When he reached this bachelor's home he did not know what to do with himself. He thought he would write to a celebrated firm of contractors to make an appointment for the morning; but it [83] was past twelve o'clock, and the letters had been collected.

Some men called him to come and play loo, but he was not in the mood for cards. He tried billiards, and found his hand unsteady; he went into the smoking-room, but it was hot and noisy. He had always liked his club, and maintained against all comers that it was a glorious institution; but now he began to see that after all a middle-aged gentleman of ample fortune might find himself pleasanter lodgings. He went out of doors, where the air was so sweet and cool, rustling up and down an ivied wall, and over a strip of lawn that lay deep in shadow below it; and looking at the clear dark sky and the clear pale stars, he put to himself a momentous question, for which [84] he had a half-shaped answer ready:

"Who shall I ask to be the mistress of my house?"

[85]

CHAPTER IV.

THE ANSWER.

A girl of eighteen is popularly supposed to be grown up—to have all wisdom and knowledge necessary for her guidance and protection through the supreme difficulties of a woman's lot. When one gets ten years older, one is apt to think that this is a mistake. Life is not so easy to learn. The treasures of love, like visions of the Holy Grail, are not revealed to those who have known none of the waiting, and yearning, [86] and suffering, and sacrifice that teach their divine nature and their immeasurable worth.

And to all the vast meanings and solemn mysteries that surround the great question of right and wrong—the great question of human life—the spiritual eyesight is blind, or worse than blind, until the experience of years of mistakes and disillusions brings, little by little, dim apprehensions of light and truth.

Rachel Fetherstonhaugh, with the snare of her beauty and her sensuous love of luxurious surroundings newly laid about her feet, entered upon her kingdom more than ordinarily unprepared.

Poor little, helpless, foolish child! How was she to know that marriage meant something better [87] than a richly-appointed house and a kind protector? How could she be held accountable for the commission, or contemplation, of a crime against her youth and womanhood of whose nature and consequences she was absolutely ignorant?

She was flitting in and out through the French windows of the drawing-room one fine morning, with a basket of flowers on her arm, busily engaged in rearranging the numerous little bouquets that she made it her business to keep in perennial freshness all about the house, when Mr. Kingston was announced.

She had seen him several times since the night of the opera; he had left his card twice when she had been away from home; and Mrs. Hardy had had polite messages respecting the horse, which [88] had been duly sent for her approval. He came in now, with his light and jaunty step, bowing low, and smiling so that his white teeth shone under his Napoleonic moustache, carrying a large roll of paper in his hand.

"Good morning, Miss Fetherstonhaugh," he exclaimed gaily. "I must apologise for this early call; but I can never find you at home after lunch these fine days."

Rachel, who had not seen his approach nor heard him enter the house, whose hall-door was standing open for her convenience, turned round with her hands full of flowers. In the sunshine of the morning she looked more fair and refined than he had ever seen her, he thought. The [89] plainest little black gown showed her graceful shape to perfection; her complexion, always so delicate, was flushed and freshened with the wind and her embarrassment.

As for her hair, half-covered with a shabby garden hat on the back of her head, it was the central patch of light and colour in the bright-hued room; he was sure he had never seen hair so silky in texture and so rich in tint.

His ideal woman, hitherto, had been highly polished and elaborately appointed; she had been a woman of rank and fashion, in Parisian clothes, a queen of society, always moving about in state,

with her crown on. But now, in the autumn of his years, all his theories of life were being overturned by an ignorant little country girl, sprung from nobody knew where; and a coronet of diamonds would not have had the charm of that old straw hat, with a wisp of muslin round it, which framed the sweetest face he had ever seen or dreamed of. [90]

"My aunt is in her room," she stammered hastily; "I will send to tell her you are here. She will be very glad to see you."

And she called back the servant who had admitted him, and sent a message upstairs.

Mrs. Hardy, however, did not hurry herself. She was a thrifty housekeeper still, as in her early days, and devoted her forenoons religiously to her domestic affairs. Just now she was sorting linen that had returned from the wash; and, hearing that her niece was in the drawing-room, she had no scruple about remaining to finish her task. [91]

"Say I will be down directly," she said. And she did not go down for considerably more than half an hour.

In the meantime Rachel tumbled her flowers into the basket, took off her hat, and seated herself demurely in a green satin chair.

"It is a lovely morning," she remarked.

"Oh, a charming morning—perfectly charming! You ought to be having a ride, you know. Have you tried Black Agnes yet?"

"No, not yet. My habit has not come home. They promised to send it last night, but they did not. I am very anxious to try her. She is the prettiest creature I ever saw. I—I," beginning to blush violently, "have not half thanked you for your kindness, Mr. Kingston." [92]

"Pray don't mention it," he replied, waving his hand; "I shall be only too glad if I am able to give you a little pleasure."

"It is the *greatest* pleasure," she said, smiling. "But she is so good—so much too good—I am half afraid to take her out, for fear anything should happen to her. Uncle Hardy says she is a much better horse than he wants for me."

"Your uncle had better mind his own business," said Mr. Kingston, with sudden irritation. "If you are to have a horse at all, you must have one that is fit to ride, of course." [93]

"But I think it is his business," suggested Rachel, laughingly.

"No; just now it is mine. I mean," he added hastily, a little alarmed at the expression and colour of her face, "that Black Agnes is mine. And while I lend her to you she is yours. And I trust you will use her in every way as if she were actually yours."

"Thank you; you are very kind. I hope nothing *will* happen to her. I shall take great care of her, of course. I will not jump fences or anything of that sort."

"Oh, pray do," urged Mr. Kingston. "She is trained to jump. She has carried a lady over fences scores of times." The fact was he had only bought her a few days before, and had selected her from a large and miscellaneous assortment on account of this special qualification. "I hope you will let me ride out with you, and show you my old cross-country hunting leaps. You will not mind jumping fences with her, if I am with you, and make you do it?" [94]

"No," she said, "for I shall show you that it is not the fault of my riding if accidents happen."

"Exactly. I am sure it will not be your fault. But we will not have any accidents—I will take too good care of you. Can't we go out this afternoon? Oh, I forgot that habit. I'll call on your tailor, if you'll allow me, and 'exhort' him; shall I? I have done it before, on my own account, with the most satisfactory results." [95]

"No, thank you," said Rachel, "I would not give you that trouble. He will send it home when it is ready, I suppose."

And she rose from her chair and began to move about the room, wondering whether her aunt was ever coming downstairs.

Mr. Kingston thought it would be expedient to change the conversation.

"I have brought you the plans of my house," he said, taking up his roll of papers, and beginning to spread great sheets on a table near him. "I meant to have asked your opinion before I began to build it, but—well, I took it for granted that you would like it as it was."

"Ah, yes," responded Rachel brightly, coming to his side. "Uncle Hardy said you had begun. And you know I can see all the men and carts from my window. Oh! oh!" [96]

This enthusiastic exclamation greeted the unrolling of the "front elevation," which, in faint outlines, filled in with pale washes of grey and blue and pink, showed her the towers and colonnades of her ideal palace. When he heard it, Mr. Kingston's heart swelled. He was more charmed with his pretty creature than ever.

"This, you see," said he, "is the main entrance—fifteen steps. But won't you sit down? You will see

better. And this wing is where the drawing-rooms are to be," he added, when she had seated herself, and he had taken a chair beside her. "There are three large rooms in a line, that can all [97] be thrown together on occasions—when necessary. I have not decided about the furniture yet, nor the colours of the walls. You must help me with those things presently. The dados, which are being designed at home, are to be of carved wood, most of them; mantelpieces to match. Some of the dados will be of inlaid stone, tiles, and that sort of thing. I suppose you don't know what a dado is, do you?"

"No," said Rachel, meekly. Whereupon he entered into elaborate explanations.

"I think I should not like tiles on the wall," she ventured to remark; "they would feel very cold, wouldn't they?"

"They tell me tile is the proper thing," he replied; "and of course I want to have everything that is [98] proper. But whatever my—my wife wishes shall be law, of course. In her own rooms, at any rate, she shall consult her own taste entirely."

Rachel stared at him, coloured and laughed. "Oh, you did not tell me about your wife before," she said. "I did not know you were engaged to be married. That is why you are making haste to build your house? I am very glad. I congratulate you."

"Do not; do not," he stammered earnestly. "I speak of a possible wife, because I hope to have a wife some day. I am not engaged. I wish I were."

"Oh!" she said, looking down bashfully, with oleander blossoms everywhere. "I beg your pardon." [99]

"I wish I were," he repeated. "But I am going to get ready for that happy time against it does come. See, these are to be her rooms. They face the south, and I am going to have a rose garden below them. This is to be her boudoir. I thought of having the walls and the ceiling painted in coral. I have noticed that pink lights in a room are very becoming to a lady's complexion, rather pale on the walls, for the sake of the pictures. You said you liked plenty of pictures?"

"I? Oh, yes, I like pictures."

"And I did mean to have a dado of very fine, rich tiles to make a foundation of colour, you know; but you don't like tiles?"

"Oh, but *I* don't know anything about it, Mr. Kingston! You had better do what you said—furnish [100] the other rooms, and leave your wife, when you get one, to choose the decorations of her own herself."

"She *shall* choose them herself. But, Miss Fetherstonhaugh—"

"Rachel, my dear, your habit has come," said Mrs. Hardy, appearing at this interesting moment. "Oh, how do you do, Mr. Kingston? Pray forgive me for leaving you so long. I hope you have come to lunch? Oh, yes, you must stay to lunch, of course. We'll take you into town afterwards, when we go out to drive."

Mr. Kingston stayed to lunch, and made himself very agreeable. But then he went into town by himself, and returned in an incredibly short space of time in riding costume, mounted on a [101] powerful brown horse. During his absence, Rachel had put on her habit, and found that it fitted her beautifully; and Black Agnes had been caparisoned, and was pawing the gravel before the hall door. Mrs. Reade, magnificently attired for a series of state calls, had appeared upon the scene, and was regulating all these pleasant circumstances.

"Now then, Mr. Kingston, you must only take her along quiet roads. And she is not to jump any fences when Ned is not with her."

"Why, Ned?" inquired Mr. Kingston. "I am as learned in fences as Ned, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes, I know all about that. But it is the look of the thing. You remember, Rachel, you are not [102] to jump fences."

"No, Beatrice, I won't."

"Have a good gallop, my dear, and enjoy it," the little woman added. "I'll take care of mamma; and when we have done all our calls we will come and meet you."

Mr. Kingston stepped jauntily to Black Agnes's side. He was an old steeplechase rider before he was a successful city merchant, and he looked ten years younger in his riding-dress. Rachel, with a radiant face, approached him, and laid her small foot on his proffered palm.

In a moment she was up like a feather, and sitting square and light in her saddle like a practised horsewoman as she was; and all her attendants, groom included, looked up at her admiringly. [103] Even Mrs. Hardy forgot the expense she had been put to.

"The child certainly does look well on horseback," she remarked, resignedly, as Black Agnes's shining haunches disappeared round a clump of laurels. "What a figure she has, Beatrice!"

"Oh, dear me, yes!" assented the younger matron pettishly. "Why didn't *we* have figures like that!"

Meanwhile, the black mare and the big brown horse paced out into the road, and for a little while

the riders contented themselves with friendly glances at one another. Rachel was crimson with pride and bashfulness, looking lovely and riding beautifully, as she could not but know she was. [104] Mr. Kingston, sharing some measure of her elation and excitement, was absorbed in looking at and admiring her.

By and bye they had a long canter, which carried them well out into the country, where there were no houses and no people, and where the shadows were beginning to rest on the peaceful autumn landscape. And then Mr. Kingston made her draw rein under a clump of trees, while she looked back at the city they had left behind, glorified in the light of the sinking sun.

"So now there is something else you like besides operas and balls?" he said, laying his hand upon the black mare's silky mane.

"Yes," she replied, drawing a long breath, "and I think this is best of all! She is like a swallow— [105] she seems to skim the ground! And I—I don't know when I have felt so happy!"

All his years and his experience went for nothing under these circumstances, when she looked as sweet as she did now.

"You must keep Black Agnes," he said eagerly. "I will speak to your uncle. I will not have you riding low-bred brutes. Nothing but the best is fit for you; you, who know how to ride so well, and enjoy it so much! You will keep her, to please me?"

If she had been sitting in a green satin drawing-room she would probably have checked this [106] ardent outburst at an apparently harmless stage. She would have blushed, and looked grave and majestic; but now she was, in a sense, intoxicated. She lifted a pair of radiant, grateful eyes to his face, and she held out her hand impulsively.

"How good you are to me!" she said. "How much pleasure you give me!"

And then, of course, he succumbed altogether.

"That is what I want to do, not now, but always," he said, drawing the mare's head to his knee, and the small, weak hand to his lips, which had kissed so many hands, though never with quite the same kind of kiss. "That is why I am building my house. It is you I wanted to be its mistress— [107] didn't you know that?—to do just what you like with it, and with me, and with all I have!" And, when once he had fairly set it going, the flood of his eloquence, running in a well-channelled groove, flowed freely, and overwhelmed the poor little novice, who had never been made love to before.

"I—we—we have only seen each other a few times," she ventured to suggest at last, but not until her imagination had been captivated by the splendid prospect before her. She had the colour of a peony in her cheeks, and frightened tears in her soft child's eyes; but her experienced lover knew that his cause was gained.

"That has been enough for me," he said. "Once was enough for me." Then, after a long pause, [108] "Well? Is it to be 'yes' or 'no?'"

"Oh, I don't know!" she stammered desperately, turning her head from side to side. "I have had no time. Let us wait until we know each other better."

"*I* know quite enough," he persisted, "and I am not so young as you are that I can afford to wait."

She trembled and panted, gathering up her reins and dropping them in an agony of embarrassment.

"Oh," she said at last, "what can I say? Won't you let me speak to Aunt Elizabeth?"

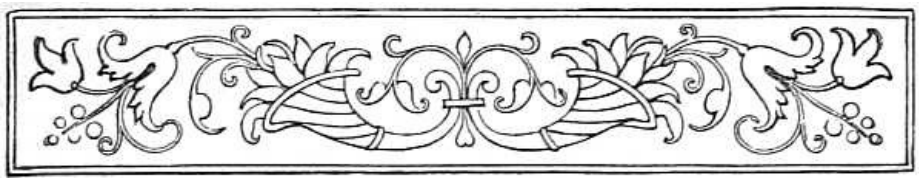
"Of course, as soon as you like after you get home. I am not afraid of Aunt Elizabeth. I know what [109] *she* will say. But now, dear—while we are here by ourselves—I want you to tell me, of your own self, whether you like me—whether you would really like to come and live with me in my new house? You don't want anybody to help you to make up your mind about that?"

"No," she whispered, hanging her head, feeling at once terrified and elated, and wishing to goodness she could see Mrs. Hardy and Beatrice driving along the lonely empty road.

"You *would* like it? Turn your face to me and say 'Yes,' just once, and I won't bother you any more."

She turned her face, scarlet all over her ears and all down her throat, and she tried to meet his [110] ardent eyes and could not. Her lips shaped themselves to say "Yes," but no sound would come. However, sound would have been, perhaps, less expressive than the silence which overwhelmed her in this proud but dreadful moment. At any rate, Mr. Kingston was satisfied.

[111]



CHAPTER V.

SO SOON!

THEY rode home sedately in the cool and quiet evening. Mr. Kingston, having accomplished the end for which he had contrived this unchaperoned expedition, was content to keep close to his pretty sweetheart's side, to look in her face occasionally with significant smiles, and to ruminate on his own good fortune.

[112] Rachel, fluttered and dismayed at the situation in which she found herself, bestowed a wandering attention on the near-side fields and hedges, and discouraged conversation. It is needless to remark that the carriage did not come to meet them. The long shadows lengthened, the sun sank down below the glowing horizon, the glory of the evening faded away into the soft dusk of the autumn night.

Lamps were being lighted when they entered Toorak; the workmen who had begun at the foundations of the new house were "knocking off;" the gates of Mrs. Hardy's domain were standing open, and the woman at the lodge informed them that she had not returned from her drive.

They rode up to the house, and Mr. Kingston got off his horse and lifted Rachel down. She [113] disengaged herself from his arms as quickly as possible, and then stood on the doorstep, while the groom led both horses away, and looked at her *fiancé* anxiously, blushing with all her might.

"Won't you let me come in?" he asked smiling. But he did not mean to be refused admittance; and he turned the handle of the door and led her into the hall and into the drawing-room, as if it had been his own house.

The lamps had not been lit in the drawing-room, but a bright fire was burning, making a glow of rich and pleasant colour all over its mossy carpet and its shining furniture. Rachel's flowers were blooming everywhere. Soft armchairs stood seductively round the cheerful hearth. An afternoon tea-table was set for four, with everything on it but the teapot. [114]

"My aunt is late," said Rachel uneasily. "I wonder what can have kept her. I hope there has been no accident."

Mr. Kingston showed all his teeth in a momentary smile, and then addressed himself to the opportunity that had so happily offered.

"Oh, no, she is not late; it is the days that are getting so short," he said. And as he spoke he unfastened her hat and laid it aside, and then drew her burning face to his shoulder and kissed her. She stood still, trembling, to let him do it, one tingling blush from head to foot. She liked him very much; she was very proud and glad that she was going to marry him; she quite understood [115] that it was his right and privilege to kiss her, if he felt so disposed. Still her strongest conscious sentiment was an ardent longing for her aunt's return—or her uncle's, or anybody's. The spiritual woman in her protested against being kissed.

"I want you not to be afraid of me," said Mr. Kingston, half anxious, half amused, as he patted her head. "I am not an ogre, nor Bluebeard either; you seem to shrink from me almost as if I was. You must not shrink from me *now*, you know."

"I will not—by and bye—when I get used to it," she gasped, with a touch of hysterical excitement, extricating her pretty head, and standing appealingly before him, with her pink palms outwards. [116] "I'm not afraid of you, Mr. Kingston, but—but it is very new yet! I shall get used to it after a little."

He looked down at her with sudden gravity. She was on the verge of tears.

"Oh, yes," he said quietly, almost paternally, "we shall soon get used to each other. There is plenty of time. Let me see—how old are you? Don't tell me; let me guess. Eighteen?"

She smiled and composed herself. Yes, she was just eighteen. Somebody must have told him. No, upon his honour, nobody had; it was his own guess entirely. Did he not think he ought to have chosen someone older for such a position of importance and responsibility? No; she was gallantly [117] assured that she had been an object, not of choice, but of necessity. And so on.

When the dialogue had brought itself down to a sufficiently sober level, he took her hand, and

drawing her into a seat beside him, continued to hold it, and to stroke her slight white fingers between his palms.

"They say good blood always shows itself in the fineness of a woman's hands," he said; "if so, you ought to be particularly well-born."

"I don't know what your standard is," she answered, smiling. "My father came of a border family ages ago, I believe. I never knew anything about my mother's parentage; she died when I was a baby."

"I am *sure* you are well born," he said, looking fondly and proudly at her as she sat in the firelight, with her golden hair shining. "I shall have not only the finest house, but the most beautiful wife to sit at the head of my table. I don't believe there is another woman in Melbourne who will compare with you, especially when you get those diamonds on." [118]

"Diamonds!" ejaculated Rachel.

"Yes; those diamonds you talked about the other night, don't you know?—that you would have if you were very rich. Well, you are going to be very rich. And I am going to order you some of them to-morrow. You must give me the size of your finger. A 'ring full of diamonds,' didn't you say? How full?"

Rachel smiled, blushed, and ceased to feel that strong repugnance to the amenities of courtship which had distressed both herself and her lover at an earlier stage. [119]

Here a servant came in to light the gas. The man appeared conscious of the inopportuneness of his intrusion, and despatched his business in nervous haste, clinking the pendants of the cut-glass chandelier in a manner that his mistress would have highly disapproved of.

Rachel and her visitor watched him with a sort of silent fascination, as if they had never seen gas lighted before. When he was gone, Mr. Kingston took out his watch. It was past six o'clock. He had a dinner engagement at seven, and had to get into town and change his clothes.

"I'm afraid I dare not wait for Mrs. Hardy," he said, rising. "I hate to go, but you know I would not if I could help it. I will see your uncle at his office the first thing in the morning, and come to lunch afterwards. Shall I?" [120]

"If you like," murmured Rachel, shyly. And then she submitted to be kissed again, and being asked to do it, touched her lover's fierce moustaches with her own soft lips—not "minding" it nearly so much as she did at first. She was beginning to get used to being engaged to him.

When immediately after his departure Mrs. Hardy, having left her daughter at her own house, came home, and heard what had been taking place, she could hardly believe the evidence of her ears.

"So soon!" she ejaculated, lifting her hands. "Is it credible? My dear, are you sure you are not making a mistake?" [121]

Remembering the wear and tear of mind and body that the management of these affairs had cost her hitherto—remembering the illusive and unsubstantial nature of all Mr. Kingston's previous attentions to the most attractive marriageable girls—she found the suddenness of the thing confounding.

"Don't you think you may have misunderstood him?" she reiterated, anxiously. "I'm afraid he is rather given to say more—or to appear to say more—than he means sometimes."

Rachel blushingly testified to the good faith of her *fiancé*, by references to the ring for which her finger had already been measured, and to the impending interview at her uncle's office. [122]

"I should never have thought of it of myself Aunt Elizabeth," she said meekly.

Mrs. Hardy sank into an easy chair, and unbuttoned her furs, as if to give her bosom room to swell with the pride and satisfaction that possessed her. Then, looking up at the slender figure on the hearthrug, at the candid innocent face of the child who had been bequeathed to her love and care, a maternal instinct asserted itself.

"My dear," she said, "you are very young, and this is a serious step. You must take care not to run into it heedlessly. Do you really feel that you would be happy with Mr. Kingston? He is much older than you are, you know." [123]

Rachel thought of the new house, and of the diamonds, and of all her lover's tributes to her worth and beauty.

"Yes, I think so, aunt. He is a very nice man. He is very kind to me."

"He has lived so long as a bachelor, that he has got into bachelor ways," Mrs. Hardy reluctantly proceeded. "He has been rather—a—gay, so they say. I doubt if you will find him domesticated, my dear."

"I shall not *wish* him to stay always at home with me," replied the girl, with a fine glow of generosity. "And I do not mind tobacco-smoke, nor latchkeys, nor things of that sort. And if he is fond of his club, I hope he will go there as often as he likes. *I* shall not try to deprive him of his pleasures, when he will give me so many of my own. And, you know, dear aunt, I shall be quite [124]

close to you; I can never be lonely while I am able to run in and out here."

Mrs. Hardy was reassured. This was the pliant, sweet-natured little creature who would adapt herself kindly to any husband—who was not, of course, an absolutely outrageous brute.

And Mr. Kingston, except that he was a little old, a little of a *viveur*, a trifle selfish, and, it was said, rather bad tempered when he was put out, was everything that a reasonable girl could desire. She smiled, rose from her chair, and kissed her niece's pretty face with motherly pride and fondness. [125]

"Well, my love, it is a great match for you," she said, "and I hope it will be a happy one as well."

And then, hearing her husband coming downstairs, she left the room hurriedly to meet and drive him back again, that she might explain to him the interesting state of affairs while she put on her gown for dinner.

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[126]

CHAPTER VI.

A RASH PROMISE.

THERE was of course no opposition to Rachel's engagement. Mr. Hardy, away from his office, was simply Mrs. Hardy's husband, not because he had no will of his own, but because he acknowledged her superior capacity for the management of that complicated business called getting on in the world, to which they had both devoted their lives for so many years.

Mrs. Reade, who next to her mother was the greatest "power" in the family, approved of the match highly, though she had herself proposed to be Mrs. Kingston at an earlier stage of her career; but she had a good deal to say before she would allow it to be considered a settled thing. [127]

In the first place she had a serious talk with the bridegroom-elect, in which she demanded on Rachel's behalf certain guarantees of good behaviour when he should have become a married man. She was a clever little clear-headed woman, full of active energies, for which the minding of her own business did not supply employment; and being blessed with plenty of self-confidence and much good sense and tact, she contrived to give her friends a great deal of assistance with theirs, without giving them offence at the same time. [128]

Occasionally she came across another strong-minded woman who objected to interference; but the men never objected. They rather liked it, most of them.

Mr. Kingston, at any rate, thought it was very pleasant to be lectured in a maternal manner by a woman five feet high, who was just thirty years younger than he was; and he made profuse and solemn promises that he would be "a good boy," and take the utmost care of the innocent young creature who had confided her happiness to his charge. And then she fetched Rachel away to spend the day with her, and, over a protracted discussion of afternoon tea, gave *her* some valuable advice as to the conduct of her affairs. [129]

"You know," she said, with much gravity and decision, "it is always best to look at these things in a practical way. Mr. Kingston is, no doubt, a splendid match, and not a bad fellow, as men go; but it is no use pretending that he won't be a great handful. He has been a bachelor too long. The habit of having his own way in everything will have become his second nature. I doubt if anyone could properly break him of it now, and I am sure *you* could not."

"I should not try," said Rachel, smiling. "I should like my husband, whoever he was, to have his own way."

Mrs. Reade shook her head.

"It doesn't answer, my dear. What is the use of a man marrying if his wife doesn't try to keep him straight? And if you give in to him in everything, he only despises you for it." [130]

"But, Beatrice," Rachel protested, "all men don't want keeping straight, do they? It seems to me that every case is different from every other case. One is no guide for another."

"I know it isn't. I'm only thinking of your case. And I want to make you understand it. You don't know him as well as I do, and you don't know anything about married life. If you run into it blindfold, and let things take their chance, then—why, then it is too late to talk about it. Everything depends upon how you begin. You must begin as you mean to go on." [131]

"And how ought I to begin?" inquired Rachel, still smiling. She could not be brought to regard this momentous subject with that serious attention which it demanded.

"Well, *I* should take a very high hand if it were my case—but you are not like me. I should put a stop to a great deal that goes on now at *once*, and get it over, while the novelty and pleasure of his marriage was fresh and my influence was supreme. I should try to make him as happy as possible, of course, for both our sakes. I'd humour him in little things. I'd never put him out of temper, if I could help it. But I would keep him well in hand, and on no account put up with any nonsense. If they see you mean that from the beginning, they generally give in; and by and bye they are used to it, and settle down quietly and comfortably, and you have no more trouble." [132]

Rachel's smiling face had been growing grave, and her large eyes dilating and kindling.

"Oh, Beatrice," she broke out, "that is not marriage—not my idea of marriage! How can a husband and wife be happy if they are always watching each other like two policemen? And they marry on purpose to be happy. I think they should love one another enough to have no fear of those treacheries. If they are not alike—if they have different tastes and ways—oughtn't they to be companions whenever they *can* enjoy things together, and help each other to get what else they want. Love should limit those outside wants—love should make everything safe. If that will not, I don't think anything else will. I should never have the heart to try anything else, if that failed." [133]

Mrs. Reade gazed with intense curiosity and interest at this girl, with her young enthusiasm and her old-world philosophy. She was so surprised at the unexpected element introduced into the dialogue, that for a few minutes she could not speak. Then she put out her hand impulsively and laid it on Rachel's knee.

"Is *that* how you feel about Mr. Kingston?" she exclaimed, earnestly. "My dear, I beg your pardon. I did not know how things were. If you think of your marriage in that way, pray forget all I have been saying, and act as your own heart dictates. That will be your safest guide." [134]

So Rachel was engaged with satisfaction to all concerned. She conscientiously believed that she loved her elderly *fiancé*, and that she would be very happy with him; and the rest of them thought so too—himself of course included.

The winter wore away, full of peace and pleasure. The interesting event was public property, and the engaged pair were fêted and congratulated on all sides, and enjoyed themselves immensely.

Rachel had her diamond ring, and a diamond bracelet into the bargain, with a promise of the "necklace of stars, strung together," on her wedding day: and her aunt in consideration of her prospective importance, bought her the coveted sealskin jacket. [135]

Black Agnes was made over to her entirely, and she rode and jumped fences to her heart's content. She went to the opera whenever she liked. She was the belle of all the balls; and in the best part of Melbourne her splendid home was being prepared for her, where she was to reign as a queen of beauty and fashion, with unlimited power to "aggravate other women"—which is supposed by some cynics to be the highest object of female ambition.

And Mr. Kingston bore with extreme complacency the jokes of his club friends on his defection from that faith in the superior advantages of celibacy, which he and some of them had held in common; for he knew they all admired his lady-love extravagantly, if they did not actually go so far as to envy him her possession. And he attended her wherever she went with the utmost assiduity. [136]

When the winter was nearly over, an event occurred in the Hardy family which made a change in this state of things. Mrs. Thornley, the second daughter, who lived in the country, having married a wealthy landowner, who preferred all the year round to manage his own property, presented Mrs. Hardy with her first grandchild; and being in rather delicate health afterwards, wrote to beg her mother to come and stay with her, and of course to bring Rachel.

To this invitation Mrs. Hardy responded eagerly by return of post, and bade Rachel pack up quickly for an early start. Rachel was delighted with the prospect, even though it involved her separation from her betrothed; and her preparations were soon completed. Mr. Hardy was handed over to his daughter Beatrice, "to be kept till called for;" one old servant was placed in charge of the Toorak house, and others on board wages; and Mrs. Hardy, paying a round of farewell calls, intimated to her friends that she was likely to make a long visit. [137]

Rachel rose early on the day of her departure. It was a very lovely morning in the earliest dawn

of spring, full of that delicate, delicious, champagny freshness which belongs to Australian mornings. She opened her window, while yet half dressed, to let in the sweet air blowing off the sea. [138]

Far away the luminous blue of the transparent sky met the sparkle of the bluer bay, where white sails shone like the wings of a flock of sea-birds. Below her, spreading out from under the garden terraces, far and wide, lay Melbourne in a thin veil of mist and smoke, beginning to flash back the sunshine from its spiky forest of chimney stacks and towers. And close by, through an opening in the belt of pinus insignis which enclosed Mr. Hardy's domain, and where just now a flock of king parrots were noisily congregating after an early breakfast on almond blossoms, she could see the dusty mess surrounding the nucleus of her future home, and the workmen beginning their day's task of chipping and chopping at the stones which were to build it; even they were picturesque in this glorifying atmosphere. How bright it all was! Her heart swelled with childish exultation at the prospect of a journey on such a day. [139]

As for Mr. Kingston, to be left behind to stroll about Collins Street disconsolately by himself, just now she did not give him a thought.

Two or three hours later, however, when she and her aunt, accompanied by "Ned"—who had no office, unfortunately for him, and was therefore driven by his wife to make himself useful when opportunity offered—arrived at Spencer Street, there was Mr. Kingston on the platform waiting to see the last of her. If she was able to leave him without any severe pangs of regret and remorse, he for his part was by no means willing to let her go. [140]

"You will write to me often," he pleaded, when, having placed her in a corner of the ladies' carriage, he rested his arms on the window for a last few words. Mrs. Hardy was leaning out of the opposite window, deeply interested in the spectacle of an empty Williamstown train patiently waiting for its passengers and its engine.

"Yes," said Rachel slowly; "but you must remember I shall be in the country, and shall have no news to make letters of."

"I don't want news," he replied with a shade of darkness in his eager face. "Pray don't give me news—that's a kind of letter I detest. I want you to write about yourself." [141]

"I—I have never had many friends," she stammered, "and I am not used to writing letters. You will be disappointed with mine—and perhaps ashamed of me."

"What rubbish! Do you think I shall be critical about the grammar and composition? Why, my pet, if you don't spell a single word right I shan't care—so long as you tell me you think of me, and miss me, and want to come back to me."

"Oh," said Rachel bridling, "I know how to *spell*."

Here a railway official shouldered them apart in order to lock the door, and Mr. Kingston demanded of him what he meant by his impudence. Having satisfied the claims of outraged dignity, he again leaned into the window, and put out his hand for a tender farewell. [142]

"Good-bye, my darling. You *will* write often, won't you? And mind now," with one of his Mephistophelian smiles, "you are not to go and flirt with anybody behind my back."

"I never flirt," said Rachel severely.

"Nor fall in love with handsome young squatters, you know."

"Don't talk nonsense," she retorted, melting into one of her sunny smiles. "If you can't trust me, why do you let me go?"

"I would not, if I had the power to stop you—you may be quite sure of that. But you will promise me, Rachel?"

"Promise you what?"

"That you will be constant to me while you are away from me, and not let other men——" [143]

She lifted her ungloved hand, on which shone that ring "full of diamonds" which he had given her, and laid it on his mouth—or rather on his moustache.

"Now you'll make me angry if you go on," she said, with a playfully dignified and dictatorial air. "No, I won't hear any more—I am ashamed of you! after all the long time we have been engaged. As if I was a girl of *that* sort, indeed!"

Here the signal was given for the train to start, and Mrs. Hardy came forward to make her own adieux, and to give her last instructions to her son-in-law, who had been meekly standing apart.

As they slowly steamed out of the station, Rachel rose and comforted her bereaved lover with a last sight of her fair face, full of fun and smiles. [144]

"Good-bye," she called gaily; "I promise."

"Thank you," he shouted back.

He lifted his hat, and kissed the tips of his fingers, and stood to watch the train disappear into the

dismal waste that lay immediately beyond the station precincts. Then he walked away dejectedly to find his cab. He had grown very fond of his little sweetheart, and he anticipated the long, dull days that he would have to spend without her.

He wished Mrs. Hardy had been a little more definite as to the time when she meant to bring her home. It was not as if he were a young man, with any quantity of time to waste. However, he had [145] her assurance that she would be true to him under any temptations that should assail her in his absence; and though too experienced to put absolute faith in that, it greatly cheered and consoled him. He stepped into his hansom, and told the driver to take him to Toorak, that he might see how the house where they were going to live together was getting on.

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[146]

CHAPTER VII.

TWO LOVE LETTERS.

Mr. Kingston *to* Miss Fetherstonhaugh.

"MY dearest love,

"I had no idea that Melbourne *could* be such a detestable hole! Why have you gone away, and taken all the life and brightness out of everything?

"If I had not the house to look after—and there is not much to interest one in that at present—I declare life would not be worth the trouble it entails in the mere [147] matter of dressing and dining, and slating the servants and tradespeople.

"I went to Mrs. Reade's last night. Everybody was there; but I was bored to that extent that I came home in an hour (and physicked *ennui* at the card-table, where I lost ten pounds). I could not get up any interest in anybody. Mrs. Reade herself looked remarkably well. She is a very stylish woman, though she is so small. And Miss Brownlow looked handsome, as usual—to those who care for that dark kind of beauty. I confess I don't. I could only long for you, and think what a lily you would have been amongst them all, with your white neck and arms. (Be very careful of your complexion, my darling, while you are in the country; don't let the wind roughen your fine skin, nor [148] sit by the fire without a screen for your face).

"As usual, poor Reade got a good deal snubbed. I would not be in his place for something. But if a wife of mine told me in the presence of guests that I had had as much wine as was good for me, I'd take care she didn't do it a second time. My little wife, however, will know better than that; *I* have no fear of being henpecked. It was a kind of musical evening, and Sarah Brownlow sang several new songs. I thought her voice had gone off a great deal.

"I must say for Mrs. Beatrice, that she is a capital hostess, and manages her parties as well as anybody. But this one was immensely slow. Everything is slow now you are [149] away. Is it necessary for you to remain at Adelonga for the whole time of your aunt's visit? Can't you come back to town soon, and stay with Mrs. Reade? *Do* try and manage it; I'm sure your aunt would be willing, and it would be a most delightful arrangement all round.

"You will find Adelonga very dull, I fancy. It used to be a pleasant house in the old days, when Thornley was a bachelor; but two marriages must have altered both it and him, and the second Mrs. Thornley is not lively, even at the best of times, and must be terribly depressing as an invalid. There are a lot of children, too, are there not? If your aunt doesn't let you come back, can't you, when your cousin is well enough, manœuvre

to get me an invitation? I would not mind a country house if you and I were in it together. Nothing could well be drearier than town is without you. And it would be so charming to be both under the same roof! [150]

"And this reminds me of something I want to speak to you about seriously, so give me your best attention. (I wonder whether, having read so far, you are beginning to cover yourself with blushes in anticipation of what is coming? I am sure you are.)

"You told me, you know, my darling, that you did not wish to be married for a year or two—not until the house was built and finished, you said—because you were so young. But I have been thinking that that will never do. The house will probably be an immense time in hand; it is not like an ordinary plain house, you see. And *I* am not young, if you are. I don't say that I am old, but still I have come to that time of life when a man, if he means to marry and settle, should do it as soon as possible. And you are not any younger than your cousin Laura was when she married last year; and her husband, moreover, was a mere boy. I remember when Buxton was born, and he can't be five-and-twenty, nor anything like it. So you see, my pet, your proposal is *quite* absurd and unreasonable. [151]

"And now I will tell you what mine is. And I know my little girl's gentle and generous disposition too well to doubt that she will offer any serious opposition to it, or to any of my urgent wishes. I propose that we marry without any delay; that is to say, with no more delay than the preparing of your trousseau necessitates. [152]

"We have already been engaged some months, and by the time your visit is over and your preparations made, we shall have fully reached the average term of engagements amongst people of our class. I want you to let me write to your aunt (I am sure she would see the matter *quite* from my point of view), and suggest a day in September, or in October at the latest. That is a lovely time of year, and all my other plans would fit in with such an arrangement beautifully.

"You have never travelled, nor seen anything of the world yet; and I should like to show you a little before you settle down in your big house to all the cares of state. So I thought we would go for a short honeymoon to Sydney or Tasmania—whichever you like best; then come back for the races, and to see how the house was going on. I think there will be a club ball, too, about that time; if so, I know you would like to go to it *with your diamond necklace on*. Would you not? And then—while the shell of the house is building—I propose we repeat the honeymoon tour on a larger scale, and go to Europe. [153]

"I know you would like to see all that Laura Buxton is seeing now; and I will take care that you see a great deal besides. You shall make the old grand tour, if you like it; it will be new enough to you.

"And we will have a good time in Paris; and we will amuse ourselves, wherever we go, collecting furniture and pictures, and ornaments for our house. [154]

"You shall choose everything for your own rooms—as I told you my wife should—from the best looms and workshops in the world. And then when we come home we will take a house somewhere while we superintend the fitting up of our own.

"And finally, we will give a brilliant ball or something, by way of housewarming, and settle down to domestic life.

"Now is not this a charming programme? I am sure you will think so—indeed you *must*, for I have set my heart upon it.

"Pray write at once, dear love, and give me leave to put matters in train. Do you know you have been away four days and I have only had a post-card to tell me you arrived safely! That is not how you are going to treat me, I hope. I know there is a daily mail from Adelonga, and (though I repudiate post-cards) I don't care what sort of scribble you send so long as you write constantly. Remember what I told you about that. And remember your *promise*. [155]

"And now, good-night, my sweetest Rachel. Sleep well, darling, and dream of me,

"Your faithful lover,

"Graham Kingston."

Miss Fetherstonhaugh *to* Mr. Kingston.

"My dearest Graham,

"I am afraid you will think I ought to have written to you before, but I have been so much engaged ever since I arrived that I really have not had an opportunity. [156]

"Mr. Thornley is always showing me about the place, or the children are wanting me to have a walk with them, or my cousin sends for me to her room to see the baby; so that I may say I have scarcely a moment to call my own until bedtime comes, and then I am much too sleepy to write—the effect of the country air, I suppose. I am enjoying myself

excessively.

"The weather is lovely, and this is certainly the most delightful place. It is a regular old bush house, which has been added to in every direction.

"The rooms are low, and straggle about anyhow; there is no front door—or, rather, there are several; and it has shingle roofs and weatherboard walls (though all the [157] outhouses are brick and stone, and Mr. Thornley is going to build a new house presently, which I think is *such* a pity.)

"My own room has a canvas ceiling, which flaps up and down when the wind is high: and most of the floors are of that dark, rough-sawn native wood of olden times, which makes it necessary that the best carpets should have drugget, or some kind of padding under them. But, oh, how exquisitely the whole house is kept inside and out.

"The drawing-room is *much* prettier than ours at Toorak; because Mr. Thornley has travelled a great deal at odd times, and collected beautiful things, and seems to have good taste, as well as plenty of money. There are quantities of pictures everywhere; he [158] is very fond of pictures.

"And the conservatories are half as big as the house; he is fond of flowers too. Just now they are full of delicious things—cyclamens, and orchids, and primulas, and begonias, and heaths of all sorts, and azaleas, and I don't know what. There are quantities of flowers in the garden too, so early as it is. The great bushes—almost trees—of camellias are simply wonderful; and there is a bed of double hyacinths under my window of all the colours of the rainbow.

"Then there is a fernery—part of it roofed in, and part running down through the shrubberies on one side. The tree ferns make a matted roof overhead, and other ferns grow between like bushes, and little ferns sprout everywhere underneath amongst [159] stones and things. There are winding paths in and out through it, where it is quite dark at mid-day; and there are little rills and waterfalls trickling there in all directions, carried down in pipes from a dam up amongst the hills behind the house.

"Don't you think *we* might have a fern-tree gully? If the water could be got for it, it would run down the side of a terraced garden even better than it does here, where the ground falls very slightly. If you like I will ask Mr. Thornley how he made his, and all about it; he is always delighted if he can give any information. He is such an excessively kind man. I like him *so* much. How long is it since you saw him? When he was a [160] bachelor, I think you said you stayed at Adelonga. That must have been a long time ago, for his eldest daughter (just now finishing her education in Germany) is older than I am. There is a painting of him in the dining-room as a young man, and one of his first wife. His is not the least like what he is now. But I will tell you what might *really* be his portrait—Long's old inquisitor in the 'Dancing Girl' picture—I mean that genial old fellow in the arm-chair, who leans his arms on the table and grasps (I am sure without knowing what he is doing) the base of the crucifix, while he enjoys the sight of that pretty creature dancing. If you go and look at him the next time you find yourself near the picture gallery, you will see Mr. Thornley's very image. He is the soul of hospitality; [161] he is so courteous to everybody in the house—even to his children; he is one of the nicest and kindest men I ever met.

"But I have not said a word about my cousin Lucilla, or the baby, or the other children. The baby is a little *duck*. I am allowed to have him a good deal, because the nurse says I am much 'handier' than most young ladies; and I certainly *have* the knack of making him stop crying and of soothing him off to sleep.

"The other children—three dear little girls—are in the schoolroom; but Lucilla will not allow their governess to keep them too strictly, because they are not very strong. Lucilla herself I like *excessively*. She is much quieter than Beatrice, and I don't think [162] she is so clever, and she is not at all pretty: but she is very sweet-tempered and kind, and very fond of Mr. Thornley, though he is so much older than she is. I am glad to say she is getting quite strong; so much so indeed that she is going to have a large party next week.

"There are to be some country races, in which Mr. Thornley is interested, and we are all going, and some people are coming back with us to dine and spend the night. There is some talk of a ball, too, to celebrate the coming of age of young Bruce Thornley, who is now at Oxford—Mr. Thornley's eldest son. That would be the week after. I *hope* Lucilla will decide to have it; they say Adelonga balls are always charming, and that [163] people come to them from far and near.

"One enormous room, with two fireplaces, which is gun-room, billiard-room, smoking-room, and gentlemen's sanctum generally (which in the general way is divided by big Japanese screens, and laid down with carpets), was built and floored on purpose for dancing in those old times that you remember. Perhaps you have yourself danced there? Tell me if you have. I can see what a delightful ball-room it would make, with lots of shrubs and flowers. It opens into the conservatory at one end, and a passage leads from the other both into the dining-room and out upon the verandahs, which are wide, and bowered with creepers, and filled with Indian and American lounge chairs.

"How are you getting on in town? Did you go to Beatrice's party, and was it nice? I hope [164]
William will look after my dear Black Agnes properly, and not let her out in the paddock at night. *Would* you mind sometimes just calling in to see, when you are up that way?

"The workmen are having fine weather, are they not? Aunt Elizabeth and I have been telling Lucilla all about the house, and she says it will be magnificent. But Mr. Thornley does not like pink for the boudoir. He says if I have pictures, some shade of sage, or grey, or peacock would be better as a ground colour. What do you think? I must say *I* like the idea of pink.

"Now I have come to the end of my paper. And have I not written you a long letter? I [165]
hope you will not find it very stupid.

"Aunt Elizabeth and Lucilla send their kindest regards, and with much love, believe me,

"My dear Graham,

"Yours most affectionately,

"RACHEL FETHERSTONHAUGH."

"P.S.—Just received yours of Tuesday. *Please* give me a little time to think over your proposal, and do not do anything at present. The tour in Europe would be very delightful, but I think, if you don't mind, I would rather not be married *quite* so soon."

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[166]

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW RACHEL MET "HIM."

ADELONGA at about nine o'clock on the morning of the race day would have presented to the eye of the distinguished traveller—who, however, did not happen to be there, though he was a pretty constant visitor—a thoroughly typical Australian scene; typical, that is to say, of one distinct phase of Australian life. It was the enchanting weather of [167]
the country to begin with; which, say what grumblers will, is not to be matched, one month with another, in all the wide world—clear, fresh and sunshiny, with an air at once so delicate and so invigorating that none but exceptionally unhappy mortals could help feeling glad to be alive to breathe it.

There had been a cold mist overnight, which was now melting away before the sun in shining white fleeces that swathed the hollows and shoulders of the hills behind the house, long after the upper slopes and peaks had stood sharp and clear in their own forest garments against a sky as pure as a sapphire and as blue as wild forget-me-nots.

All the shrubberies that hemmed in the great garden—all the smooth-shaven wide lawns where [168]
croquet hoops still lingered—all the lovely waves and festoons of creepers that flowed over and curtained the verandah eaves—all the bright box borders, and all the gay flowerbeds—glistened with a sort of etherealised hoar-frost, and were greener than painter's palette could express in this early spring time.

The rambling, old, one-storied house, with its endless roofs and gables, was the very type and pattern of that most charming of all bush houses, *the* bush house *par excellence*; cottage in design, palace in the careful finish and elaboration of all its appointments, which, when its owner is rich and cultured, marks the latest of many developments—such as becomes, unhappily, rarer [169]
every year, and will soon have disappeared entirely.

Columns of white smoke rose from half a dozen chimneys, testifying to the noble logs that blazed away within; while French windows, sash windows, lattice casements, and doors of all sorts stood open to the morning sun and the delicious morning air. Behind the house rose a screen of budding orchard trees, flushed here and there with peach and almond blossoms. Before the house, on the wide gravelled drive, where never weed presumed to show its head, stood an open break, large, but of light American build, round which most of the family and several servants were congregated, while four powerful horses fidgetted to be starting, the wheelers only being attached at present.

Mr. Thornley stood in the break, superintending the bestowal of luncheon hampers, and shouting [170] cheerily, but with that touch of imperiousness which indicated a man who had been a master all his life, to the servants below him. Mrs. Thornley, looking slight and girlish, stood on the steps of one of the numerous front doors, wrapped in a shawl. She had wished very much to go to the races too, and to take the nurse and baby for the further glorification of the occasion; but her husband had forbidden her to think of anything so foolish, and she had ceased to do so accordingly, with an abject meekness that would have greatly disgusted Mrs. Reade.

Mrs. Hardy stood on the doorstep too, more imposing than ever beside this gentlest and most [171] unpretending of her children; and the governess came out of the house in festive apparel with her two elder pupils dancing after her.

Rachel was already on the box, where she was to sit beside the driver, to her great delight. She was in the wildest spirits, and she was looking as lovely as everything else looked on that eventful morning. She had quite disregarded Mr. Kingston's injunctions to take care of her complexion.

A dark-blue felt hat worn rather on the back of her head, left her soft face exposed to the sun and wind, as well as to the admiring gaze of all men. Nothing could have shown up its texture and colour, nor the wonderful burnished richness of her hair, better than that dark-blue hat. She [172] wore with it a dark-blue, close-fitting dress, very tight about the knees, as was then the newest mode, but setting easily to her figure otherwise, and strongly outlining all its perfect curves of girlish beauty. She would rather have displayed the sealskin jacket than her own lovely shape, if she could have found an excuse for doing so; but the day was going to be warm, and her aunt, who was a thrifty soul, would not allow the sealskin jacket to be made a mere emergency wrap of —to be thrown into the boot with the rugs and waterproofs.

Everything was ready at last, after a great deal of commotion and much running to and fro—the bountiful luncheon that was to be available for all comers when luncheon time came, the hamper [173] of crockery, the basket of fresh-cut salad, the wine, the beer, the soda-water, the spirit stove and kettle to make afternoon tea with, &c.—and the ladies took their seats.

Mrs. Hardy throned herself in an inside corner, Miss O'Hara, the governess in the opposite corner, next the door sat the butler and a nursemaid, and the children took up the room of four grown-up people in the middle of the vehicle. However, it was expected to have a full complement of passengers coming home, which was a great satisfaction to everybody.

Mr. Thornley climbed into his seat and began to gather up his reins: the two restive leaders where put to; the groom who was to accompany the carriage rode off to open gates; and "Steady! [174] steady!" roared the driver, letting out his thong with lightning flashes over the four bare backs, as the impulsive animals after their immemorial custom, mixed themselves all together in promiscuous kickings and buckings prior to coming to a clear understanding with themselves and him.

For the few delightful seconds that were occupied in getting off, Rachel was deaf to the cries of her terrified aunt, and blind to everything but the wild movement beneath her; then, as the horses sprang into their collars simultaneously with one great bound, and swept out into the paddock, scattering frightened sheep in all directions, she looked back at her cousin, standing [175] forlornly alone on the doorstep, and waved her hand rapturously.

"Good-bye! good-bye!" she called, in her clear happy voice. "I do wish you were coming!" And looking down on Mrs. Hardy before she turned her head, she rallied that stately matron in a gay and reckless manner. "It is all right, Auntie: there is nothing in the world to be afraid of. We made a beautiful start! If the off-leader does get both his traces on one side, Mr. Thornley knows how to make him get between them again. And, oh, *what* a day it is!"

It was, indeed, a day—the kind of day I suppose that has made us, young and old, the holiday-loving, easy-going, fate-defying people that we are, and for ever unfits us, when we have had a few years of them, for any more of those stern experiences, social and atmospherical, in which [176] the youth of many of us seems to us now to have been so harshly disciplined.

Sir Henry Thompson has shown us what a close affinity exists between food and virtue; no grown Briton can come out here for ten years and go back without learning something of the value of climate as a raw material of happiness.

Though every settled township in the colony has its racecourse and its yearly meetings, this, the nearest to Adelonga, was a two-hours' drive distant, even with four fast horses; and it was nearly the time for the first event to come off when our party reached the ground.

The course lay in the ring of a shallow valley, hemmed in with low hills on one slope of which the [177] vehicles of the "county families" of the neighbourhood were withdrawn a little apart from the

space occupied by the bulk of the crowd, and such booths, merry-go-rounds, and other rural entertainments as the bulk of the crowd affected.

There was no grand stand, no platform even—except the judge's box, which was dedicated to-day to Mr. Thornley's use, and a gallery running along one side of the saddling-enclosure, where the betting men chiefly congregated. But this slope, rising rather steeply immediately behind the place where a grand stand *would* have been, was a favourable position, for ladies at any rate, from which to view the main proceedings; and here the Adelonga break was brought to anchor.

Two grooms were waiting to take out the horses, which were fed and watered on the ground in [178]
the prevailing picnic fashion, and "hung up" at the boundary fence, where scores of others were tethered.

Mr. Thornley looked about for the people he expected to join his party, found they had not arrived, and then set forth to the saddling-enclosure to see what horses were going to start and when.

Rachel continued to sit on the box, and thought it was delicious. She had a powerful field-glass all to herself, and through this she surveyed the units and groups that composed the company—women and children, a great many of them, in charge of sporting husbands and fathers of all ranks, all perfectly orderly and well-behaved, and all apparently enjoying themselves as much as [179]
she was.

Some people from a neighbouring buggy came up to speak to Mrs. Hardy, and to inquire after Mrs. Thornley's health; and a carriage full of young people further down enticed away the Thornley children and Miss O'Hara.

Before she was involved in any of these social proceedings, however, Mr. Thornley returned, and asked her if she would not like to go with him and see what was doing "down there"—pointing over his shoulder in the direction from whence he had come.

In a moment she had sprung lightly from her perch and was standing beside him, pleading eagerly for her aunt's permission, which was graciously given, with certain vague qualifications [180]
that she did not stop to listen to.

And then she tripped across the green springy grass, shy and fluttered, and charmed with her enterprise, blushing vividly under the stares of those dreadful men, and feeling in her innocent heart not a little proud of the distinguished position in which she found herself.

The bell was ringing for saddling, and Mr. Thornley took her into the enclosure to see this operation, which she found deeply interesting. Crowds of men—betting men, jockeys, owners, stewards—elbowed one another in and out, and the horses paced and pranced amongst them; and into the thick of it marched the burly judge to show his young charge what there was to be seen.

And what did she see? Jockeys putting on their jackets in semi-private corners; owners [181]
superintending the adjustment of saddles and riders; noisy gamblers rushing hither and thither with book and pencil; graceful horses lightly sailing out one after another to try the chance on which so much beside money was staked; and—men falling back respectfully to make way for her wherever she went, and to gaze with surprised curiosity and admiration on the unique spectacle of so fair a creature in so rude a place. It was all very delightful.

"And now," said Mr. Thornley, who for his own part was well pleased to keep her with him, "now you shall stand in my box and see the race. Come along."

And away they went into the outside crowd, and she was escorted up the steps and placed like a [182]
queen on her royal daïs, in sight of all the country side assembled. She was inclined to think that—for once in a way—it was even better than going to the opera.

Thereafter until the race was over, she watched the proceedings with the deepest awe and interest. She was so afraid she should embarrass Mr. Thornley in the performance of his professional duty that she got as far away from him as possible, and leaning over the side railing enjoyed her observations in silence.

The horses came to their starting-place and had their usual differences of opinion. Ambitious amateurs offered advice to the starter, who recommended them to mind their own business. Two [183]
or three jockeys careered about wildly, and one was fined; and then the flag dropped, and they rushed away; and Rachel lifted her glass with trembling hands and gazed at the flying colours, mixing and fading as they passed into the sunshiny distance, and held her breath. Round they came presently, and past her they flashed, two or three together, two or three straggling behind; and the roar of the men beneath and around her made her turn a little pale.

No word was uttered that was unfit for her girl's ear to hear, but the waves of shouts rolling all about her expressed a fierce eagerness of suspense and expectation that made her think of "poor Lorraine Loree," whose husband sacrificed her to the chance of winning a race. [184]

The clamour rose, and lulled, and rose again, as for the second time the green circle was traversed and the horses came in sight—some lagging far behind, some labouring along under the whip, two keeping to the front almost neck and neck, whose names were flung wildly into the air from a hundred mouths.

And then Mr. Thornley, standing quietly with his eye upon the little slip of wood before him, said, "Bluebeard and Jessica—half a head." And it was over.

Rachel drew a long breath. She was not sorry that it was over, though she was very glad to have seen it. She shook herself, as if to get rid of a painful spell, and felt that she might begin to enjoy herself again. [185]

"*Dear* horses!" she exclaimed, with an almost solemn rapture as she watched them straggle away. She would have liked to go up and pat them all, and caress their heaving flanks and their poor trembling noses, after all they had gone through. And then her face brightened as the winner came pacing back, dropping and lifting his beautiful head as he filled his lungs again; and when his jockey saluted the judge, she leaned forward over the railing and smiled a smile in acknowledgement of his prowess, which made that jockey think himself a hero for the rest of the day.

"And now," said Mr. Thornley, "there is nothing more at present: so we'll see how your aunt is getting on, and look for the Digbys." The Digbys were the people they expected to take back with them to Adelonga. [186]

But even as he spoke he was arrested in his place by some of his many friends, who crowded the steps below him, wanting to have a few minutes' gossip about the race, or perhaps wanting to have a nearer view of her own pretty person, never seen in those parts before.

And while she waited she turned aside to have another amused look at the children in their merry-go-rounds, and the lads playing Aunt Sally, and all the simple festivities of the holiday-makers, whose proceedings she could so well survey from her present commanding position; and it was then that she saw for the first time a remarkable-looking horseman riding slowly through the crowd. [187]

Her attention was attracted in the first place by the beauty of his horse—for in a small way she was a good judge of horses: and then she noticed that the equipment of that noble animal was slightly different from what she was accustomed to see.

She supposed it was an English saddle in which that tall man sat so square and straight; then she wondered why he wore his stirrup leathers so excessively long; and then lifted her glass and stared intently at his face. There was not much of this to see just now, even through a strong glass; for he wore a small, soft cap with a peak to it, low over his eyes, in which the sun was shining, and though his jaws were shaven and his brown throat bare, he had a heavy, drooping, reddish moustache, which was the largest she had ever seen. [188]

He was riding in the direction of the judge's box, and as he came near she dropped her glass, and shrinking back shyly touched that potentate's arm. Mr. Thornley turned round, and the horseman took off his cap with a stately sort of careless courtesy, and revealed a clear-cut, keen-eyed, powerful, proud face, neither young nor old, rather thin and worn, and tanned and dried to leather-colour, which Rachel felt at once to be the most *impressive* face she had ever looked upon.

"Hullo!" cried Mr. Thornley, in an accent of profound amazement. "Why, I thought you were gone to Queensland!" [189]

"I ought to have gone," the stranger replied. He had a quiet, cool voice, that nevertheless rang clear through all the noise about them. "I duly started yesterday, but we broke a trace, and I lost my train by two minutes."

"Two minutes! Well, that was hard lines. Are the Digbys here?"

"Yes."

"You are not going to make another start immediately, I suppose?"

"Not till next week, I think."

"Then you'll come back with us to-night?"

"Thanks."

Here he reined up his horse just beside Rachel's railing, and sent a furtive but searching glance up into her pretty blushing face. [190]

"Allow me to introduce my wife's cousin, Miss Fetherstonhaugh," said Mr. Thornley, laying his hand on her shoulder with a paternal gesture. "Rachel, my dear—Mr. Roden Dalrymple."

[191]

CHAPTER IX.

A BLACK SHEEP.

"WHO is Mr. Roden Dalrymple?" asked Rachel presently. Mr. Thornley was escorting her back to her aunt, and the person in question was riding across the ground—slowly, as he had come—in search of one of the grooms of his party, to whom he might deliver his horse to be stabled in the township until the return from Adelonga.

[192] "Who is he?" repeated Mr. Thornley. "He is Mrs. Digby's brother. Nice little woman, Mrs. Digby. You will like her I know. I am very glad she has come."

"But what is he?" persisted Rachel, so absorbed in watching the tall rider swinging along at that stately, easy pace, with his long stirrups and his dangling rein, that she nearly tumbled over a couple of children who crossed her path. "Is he a Queensland squatter?"

"That is what he thinks of being," laughed Mr. Thornley, with an amused, half-mocking laugh. "He has taken up a big run with Jim Gordon, and they are going to live there and manage for themselves. A nice mess they'll make of it, I expect."

"Why?" inquired Rachel.

[193] "Why? They know no more about it than you do. How should they? Oh, by the bye, yes; I suppose Dalrymple has dabbled in cattle a little—in that South American venture of his. But that experience won't benefit him much. He lost every penny he put into that business."

"Has he lived in South America?" asked Rachel.

"He has lived all over the world, I think. He's a rolling stone, my dear, that's what he is—with the proverbial consequences."

"Is he poor, then?"

[194] "Poor as a church mouse. That is to say, he has got a bit of an estate somewhere in Scotland or Ireland—I really forget which—an old ruin of a house mortgaged to the chimney-pots, and a few starved farms, that bring him in a few odd hundreds now and again. He tries all sorts of queer schemes for mending his fortunes, but they never come to anything."

"Perhaps he is one of the unlucky ones—like my poor father," suggested Rachel.

"I don't know. I'm afraid he's a ne'er-do-weel. Judging from his past history—Jim Gordon knows all about him—he has no worse enemy than himself."

"What is his history?" Rachel asked the question with a vague sense of resentment against her prosperous host, who had probably never known misfortunes.

[195] "Well, he was an only son, and I suppose spoilt—to begin with. He was brought up for the army—simply, as far as I can make out, from force of habit, because his father and no end of grandfathers had been soldiers before him—instead of being taught how to manage and improve that ramshackle old property of his.

"He was in a crack cavalry regiment; one of the worst of them—I mean for folly and extravagance; and he went no end of a pace, as if he had the Bank of England at his back, and got all his affairs into a mess; and then he got gambling at Newmarket. The story goes that he played a brother-officer for some woman that they were both in love with; and he staked everything he had in the world that he could lay his hands on, except that old land and house, which the law kept for his children. Fortunately, he is not married, nor ever likely to be." [196]

"And he lost her?" said Rachel, in an awed whisper, with something very like tears in her eyes.

"Her? He lost more than ever she was worth, I'll be bound. He lost to that extent that he had to sell his commission to pay. The young fool! he must have been a raving lunatic."

"And what did he do then?" asked Rachel, taking out her handkerchief and blowing her nose ostentatiously.

"No one quite knows what he did for the first few years after he sold out. He lived in Paris most of his time, and knocked about on the continent, at Baden and those places—up to no good, you may be sure. Then he went to the Cape, hunting and amusing himself; and then to California, [197] gold-digging; and then all about South America, trying farming or cattle-raising, or something of that sort; and then Digby went home and married his sister, and she persuaded him to come here."

"Has he been here long?"

"A year or two. He has lived with them most of the time—learning colonial experience of Digby, I suppose. She is awfully fond of him, that little woman. And Digby never says a word against him —for her sake, I suppose."

"Why should he say anything against him?" asked Rachel rather warmly. "He is doing nothing wrong now, is he?"

"Oh, no. He is older and wiser now, I daresay. Still—still—" and Mr. Thornley looked askance at [198] the pretty young creature who was about to make this reprobate's acquaintance under his roof, and bethought him that he ought to secure her against temptation and danger—"still there's no doubt that he is rather a bad lot—what you would call a black sheep, you know, my dear—not the sort of man that it is desirable to be very intimate with."

Rachel blushed one of her ready blushes, and with such suddenness and vigour that Mr. Thornley feared he had accidentally made equivocal suggestions.

"I don't mean that he is not a gentleman—a thoroughly honourable gentleman," he explained hastily. "I don't know the rights of that Newmarket business, but in everything else, as far as I am [199] aware, his moral character is as good as mine is; otherwise I should not ask him to Adelonga. I am only speaking of him as a man who has lived a sort of loose, extravagant, Bohemian kind of life, you know."

"I know," assented Rachel absently. Already his prudent tactics were having their natural effect. She was ready to champion the cause of this apparently friendless, as well as unfortunate man; in whom, had he been recommended to her favour, she might—I do not say she *would*, but she might—have felt only an ordinary unemotional interest; and she did not want to hear any more to his disparagement.

"Is that their buggy?" she asked, nodding in the direction of a covered waggonette which was [200] now drawn up alongside the break—in which three ladies sat with Mrs. Hardy, while three gentlemen leaned in and talked to them.

"Yes," he replied, "and that is Mrs. Digby—that little woman in a brown hat. The one next her is Mrs. Hale, a neighbour of theirs—cousin of Digby's. The girl is Miss Hale. That's Digby with the big light beard. The little man is Hale. The man with a brown beard is Lessel—engaged to Miss Hale."

"Are they all coming to Adelonga?"

"They are. And I am wondering how we are going to stow them all. We can pack ten inside, with a little squeezing, but there is Dalrymple extra."

"I'll sit in the boot with the children." [201]

"And all the portmanteaus? Indeed you won't. I must take two on the box. How do you do, Mrs. Digby? How do, Mrs. Hale? How do, Miss Hale? I am delighted to see you all."

Here ensued many complicated greetings, and protracted inquiries and explanations as to everybody's health and welfare; and then Rachel found herself absorbed in the group, and the business of making all these new people's acquaintance. She was a shy, but an eminently adaptable, little person, ready to melt like snow before a smiling face and a kindly manner; and as she naturally received a great deal of attention, she was soon at her ease amongst them.

Mrs. Digby was a graceful and distinguished-looking woman, fair and pale, with a soft voice and [202] refined and gentle manners, and her she admired excessively, with the reverent enthusiasm of eighteen for a sister beauty of eight-and-twenty.

Mrs. Hale was less attractive. She was rather pompous and imperious, rather noisy and bustling,

anxious to lead the conversation, and generally to dominate the company; and withal she had no pretensions to good looks, except in respect of her very handsome costume, and not a great deal to good breeding; she was large and strong; she was rich and prosperous; she had a small, meek husband. Such as she was, she monopolised the largest share of Mrs. Hardy's attention.

Miss Hale was a comfortable, round-faced, wholesome-looking girl, pleasant to talk to, but not [203] intellectually, or indeed in any way remarkable. She devoted herself to Rachel ardently, with the air of taking friendly relations as a matter of course, under the interesting circumstances; glancing archly at Rachel's diamond ring, and displaying the less magnificent symbol of her own betrothal; and otherwise, whenever opportunity offered, suggesting the sentimental situation with more or less directness.

Rachel, however, did not find her engagement a matter of absorbing interest; she preferred to talk to Mrs. Digby about the little Digbys left at home, or to muse in silent intervals—which, to be sure, came few and far between—of that sad and tragic story of which a glimpse had just been [204] given her.

The men of the waggonette party were pleasant, ordinary men; all of them Australians born, and two of them—Mr. Digby and Mr. Lessel—fine, handsome specimens of our promising colonial race. They were assiduous in their attentions to the youngest and prettiest lady of the company, who, as a matter of course, liked their attentions; but she could not help feeling a certain restless desire for the return of Mr. Roden Dalrymple, whose absence seemed to make the circle strangely incomplete.

He was a long time coming back. They went down to witness the second race; they wandered for half-an-hour amongst the booths and merry-go-rounds to amuse themselves with any rustic fun [205] that was going on; they congregated under the shelter of the judge's box—Mrs. Digby and Miss Hale standing in it on this occasion—to see yet another "event" disposed of; and then the butler and the nursemaid with profuse amateur assistance began to spread the tablecloth for lunch on a bit of grassy level, pleasantly shadowed in the now brilliant noontide by the big body of the break.

All the portmanteaus had been placed in the boot of this capacious vehicle, and the Digbys' waggonette and horses had been sent to the hotel to await their return from Adelonga; and still there was no sign of Mr. Dalrymple.

"Where can the fellow be?" inquired Mr. Digby of the general public, looking up for a moment [206] from his interesting occupation of brewing "cup," in which Rachel was helping him. "He is the most unsociable brute I ever came across—always loafing away by himself. It isn't safe to take your eye off him for a moment."

"How well Queensland will suit him!" laughed Mrs. Hale.

"No doubt he rode down to the township to give his own orders about Lucifer," said his sister, lifting her gentle face. "You know he never cares to trust him to a groom."

"He could have done that and been back again an hour ago," rejoined her husband. "However, pray don't wait for him when lunch is ready, Mrs. Hardy; he will turn up some time."

Rachel had an indignant opinion, to which she longed to give expression, that they would all be [207] most grossly rude if they did anything of the sort. She resented this too ready inclination to slight a man who in her estimation was dignified by his heroic experiences so much above them all; and as far as in her lay she did what she could to counteract it.

She took a napkin and polished all the wine-bottles, and peeled the foil from all the champagne corks; she mixed and tossed the salad in a slow and cautious manner; she garnished the numerous meats with unnecessary elaboration; she would not allow luncheon to be ready, in short, until either one o'clock or the missing guest arrived.

She was standing on the step of the break, helping to hand down rugs and cushions for the ladies [208] to sit upon—which was not her business, as her aunt's disapproving eye suggested—when at last she discerned him far away on the outskirts of the crowd.

"It wants ten minutes to one, Mr. Thornley, and I see Mr. Dalrymple coming," she called out in her fresh, clear voice.

"Where do you see him?" asked Mr. Digby, who was standing in the break, hugging an armful of opossum rugs. "*I* don't see him."

She pointed silently, and for some minutes Mr. Digby looked in vain for his brother-in-law, knitting his brows, and shading his eyes from the sunlight. At last he saw him.

"All that way off!" he exclaimed. "You must have very good sight, Miss Fetherstonhaugh, to [209] recognise him at such a distance."

"He is easy to recognise," said Rachel, simply.

[210]

CHAPTER X.

OUTSIDE THE PALE.

THE races were over at four o'clock, with the exception of the "Consolation Stakes," and a few other informal affairs, upon which Mr. Thornley did not condescend to adjudicate; and the Adelonga party, swelled to fifteen, set off on their long drive home.

[211] It was a time of year when the twilight fell early and it was dark between six and seven; but to-night there was a moon, and there was no need to hurry; all that was necessary was to get back in comfortable time to dress for an eight o'clock dinner.

There was a great deal of conversation, but Rachel had not much share in it. The break was crowded, of course.

The two servants sat on the box with Mr. Thornley; the boot was full of portmanteaus. There was no room for the children inside, except on the knees of their elders; and one of them Rachel insisted on nursing (and she went fast asleep), while Miss O'Hara sat beside her with the other. Buxom Miss Hale was wedged opposite, with (Rachel was sure, and it offended her sense of propriety deeply) her lover's arm round her waist. Mr. Dalrymple sat by the door, almost out of [212] sight and sound.

Rachel had scarcely spoken to him all day; the profuse attentions of the other gentlemen to her had interposed between them, and perhaps, though she was not aware of it, her aunt's little manœuvres also. But her thoughts were full of him, as she sat, tired and silent, in her corner, with the sleeping child in her arms.

Her imagination was fascinated by the story of his life, which, given to her in so brief an outline, she filled in for herself elaborately, dwelling most of course upon the dramatic Newmarket episode, and wondering whether that woman was worthy or unworthy of the sacrifice of fame and fortune that he had made for her.

"What a lovely night!" remarked Miss Hale, breaking in upon her reverie. [213]

Rachel looked up, with an absent smile. The moon was beginning to outshine the fading after-glow of a gorgeous sunset; stars were stealing out, few and pale, in a clear, pale sky; the distant ranges were growing sharp and dark, with that velvety sort of bloom on them, like the bloom of ripe plums, which is the effect of the density of their forest clothing, seen through the luminous transparency of their native air.

There was a sound of curlews far away, making their melancholy wail—broken now and then by the screaming of cockatoos, or the delirious mirth of laughing jackasses, or the faint "cluck, cluck" of native companions sailing at an immense distance overhead. The frogs were serenading [214] the coming night in every pool and watercourse; the cold night wind made a sound like the sea in the gums and sheoaks under which they swept along, crashing and jingling, at the rate of ten miles an hour. The lonely bush was full of its own weird twilight beauty.

"It is a very lovely night," assented Rachel; and she sighed, and laid her cheek on Dolly Thornley's head. She was a little tired, a little sad, and she did not want to talk just now. Seeing which, Miss

Hale gave herself with an easy mind to her lover's entertainment.

However, when the four horses drew up at the most central of the Adelonga front doors, panting and steaming, with their exuberance all evaporated, the naturally light heart became light and [215] gay again. It was such a cheery arrival too. The charming old house was lit up from end to end; blazing logs on bedroom hearths sent ruddy gleams through a dozen windows; doors stood wide like open arms ready to receive all comers.

Mr. Thornley handed his guests out of the break with profuse gestures of welcome, shouting to his servants, who were trained as he was himself, to all hospitable observances, and hurried to take traps and bags.

Mrs. Thornley, looking girlish and pretty in a pale blue evening dress, stood on the doorstep, eager and smiling, scattering her graceful and cordial salutations all around her.

"Oh, Lucilla," exclaimed Rachel, when she had given her charge to a nursemaid, running up to [216] kiss her cousin, between whom and herself very tender relations—based on the baby—existed, "we have had such a *lovely* day. I am sorry you were not with us."

"I am glad you enjoyed yourself," responded Mrs. Thornley affectionately. "You have had splendid weather. Run and see if the fire is burning nicely in Mrs. Digby's room, there's a dear child."

It took some time to get all the guests collected in the house, and then to disperse them, with their wraps and portmanteaus, to their respective rooms. Rachel assisted her cousin in this pleasant business, trotting about to carry shawls, and poke up fires, and get cups of tea and cans [217] of hot water. It was the kind of service that she delighted in.

When everybody was disposed of, and she went to her own room, she found she had barely half-an-hour in which to dress herself. What, she wondered, should she put on to make herself look very, very nice. With all these strangers in the house it behoved her to sustain the credit of the family, as far as in her lay. She set about her toilet with a flush of hurry and excitement in her face.

All her weariness was gone now; she was looking as bright and lovely as it was possible for her to look. Discarding the black dress that was her ordinary dinner costume, she arrayed herself all in white—the fine white Indian muslin which had been brought to Adelonga for possible state [218] occasions, and which was, therefore, made to leave her milky throat and arms uncovered. She put on her diamond bracelet, but she took it off again. She fastened a pearl necklace—another of her lover's presents—round her soft neck, but she unfastened it, and laid it back in its velvet case.

She went into the drawing-room at last with her beauty unadorned, save only by a bit of pink heath in her bosom—without a single spark of that newly-acquired jewellery that her soul loved—lest she should help, ever so infinitesimally, to flaunt the wealth and prosperity of the family in the eyes of impecunious gentlemen. And it is needless to inform the experienced reader that Mr. Dalrymple, turning to look at her as she entered, thought she was one of the loveliest girls he had [219] ever seen.

He was far away on the other side of the room, and she did not go near him. The ladies were rustling about in their long trains and tinkling ornaments; the men were trooping in, white-tied and swallow-tailed, rubbing their hands and sniffing the grateful aroma of dinner.

Then the gong began to clang and vibrate through the house, and the company, who were getting hungry, paired themselves to order, and set forth through sinuous passages to the dining-room. Rachel being, conventionally, the lady of least consequence, was left without a gentleman to go in with; and she sat at the long table on the same side with Mr. Dalrymple, too far off to see or [220] speak to him.

When dinner was over and the ladies rose, she took advantage of a good opportunity to pay a visit to the baby, whom she had not seen all day—a terrible deprivation.

She whispered her proposed errand to Lucilla, who gratefully sent her off; and the baby being discovered awake and amiable, she spent nearly an hour in his apartment, nursing and fondling him in her warm, white arms. It was her favourite occupation, from which she never could tear herself voluntarily.

By and bye the baby dropped asleep, and was tenderly lowered into his cradle; and then having nothing more to do for him, she tucked him up, kissed him, and went back to her social duties. [221]

When she entered the drawing-room she found the whole party assembled, and some exciting discussion was going on. Mrs. Hale sitting square on a central sofa was evidently the leading spirit; and Mrs. Hardy sitting beside her, indicated to the girl's experienced eye, by the expression of her face and the elevation of her powerful Roman nose, that she was supporting her neighbour's views—whatever they were—in a determined and defiant manner. Miss Hale and Mr. Lessel had retired to a distant alcove, but they had suspended their whispered confidences to listen to the public debate. Mr. Thornley and Mr. Hale were trying to play chess, but were also distracted. Mr. Digby lounged against a side table pretending to be absorbed in *The Argus*, but [222] peeping furtively at intervals over the top of the sheet. Miss O'Hara sat apart knitting, with an expression of rigid disapproval.

Mrs. Digby, in a very central position, full in the light, lay back in a low easy chair, and fanned herself with gentle, measured movements. Her eyes were fixed on a picture in front of her, her soft mouth was set, her face was pale, proud, and grave; very different from Mrs. Thornley's beside her, which was disturbed and downcast, as that of a hostess whose affairs were not going well. Rachel saw in Mrs. Digby for the first time a strong resemblance to her brother.

Mr. Roden Dalrymple stood alone on the hearthrug with his back against the wall, and his elbows on a corner of the mantelpiece. His face was hard and cold, yet not without signs of strong emotion. [223]

It was evidently between him and Mrs. Hale that the discussion lay, and it was equally evident that the "feeling of the meeting" was against him. Rachel, taking in the situation at a glance, longed to walk over to the hearthrug and publicly espouse her hero's cause, whatever it might happen to be. What she did instead was to glide noiselessly to the back of her cousin's chair, and leaning her arms upon it, to "watch the case" on his behalf. They were all too preoccupied to notice her.

"It is all very well," Mrs. Hale was saying in an aggressive manner, "but it was nothing short of murder in cold blood. And if you had been in any other quarter of the globe when you did it, you would not have escaped to tell the tale to us here." [224]

"My dear Mrs. Hale—excuse me—I am not telling the tale to you here. I have not the slightest intention of doing so."

"But everybody knows it, of course."

"I think not," said Mr. Dalrymple.

"That you had a quarrel with a man who had once been your friend," proceeded Mrs. Hale, with a vulgar woman's unscrupulousness about trespassing on sacred ground; "and that you hunted him round the world, and then, when you met him in that Californian diggings place, shot him across a billiard-table where he stood, without a moment's warning."

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Dalrymple, calmly; "he had plenty of warning—five years at least." [225]

"Not five minutes after you met him. Mr. Gordon was there, and said that he was a dead man five minutes after you came into the room and recognised him."

"Gordon can tell you, then, that I satisfied all the laws of honour. The meeting had been arranged and expected; there were no preliminaries to go through—except to borrow a couple of revolvers and get somebody to see fair play. There were at least a dozen to do that; Gordon was one."

"Poor fellow," ejaculated Mrs. Hardy with solemn indignation. "And *he* fired in the air, I suppose?"

"He would have fired in the air, I daresay, if he had any hope that I would do so," replied Mr. Dalrymple, with a face as hard as flint, and a deep blaze of passion in his eyes. "But he well knew that there was no chance of that. He was obliged to shoot his best in self-defence." [226]

"Then you might have been killed yourself!—and what then?"

"That was a contingency I was quite prepared for, of course. What then?—I should have done my duty."

"Don't say 'duty,' Roden," interposed Mrs. Digby, very gently and gravely.

"My dear Lily, the word has no arbitrary sense; we all interpret it to suit our own views. It was my idea of duty."

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Mrs. Hardy again. "It is a dreadful story. And did he leave any family?" [227]

"I would rather not pursue the subject, Mrs. Hardy—if you have no objection."

"I wonder you are not afraid to go to bed," Mrs. Hale persisted, undeterred by the darkness of his face. "The ghost of that poor wretch would haunt *me* night and day. I should never know what it was to sleep in peace."

Rachel listened to this fragment of a conversation, which had evidently been going on for some time; and her heart grew cold within her. Mr. Dalrymple happened to turn his head, and saw her looking at him with her innocent young face scared and pale; and he was almost as much shocked as she. A swift change in himself—a straightening of his powerful, tall frame, and a flash of angry surprise and pain in his imperious eyes—aroused a general attention to her presence. [228]

"You here, my dear?" exclaimed Mrs. Hardy, much discomposed by the circumstance. "That is the worst of these irregular shaped rooms—with so many doors and corners, one never sees people go out and come in."

"How is baby?" inquired Mrs. Thornley eagerly, thankful for the diversion. "Is he sleeping nicely?"

Mr. Dalrymple strode across the room and wheeled up a chair. "Won't you sit down, Miss Fetherstonhaugh?" he said, looking at her with a little appeal in his still stern face. "You must be tired after your long day."

"Thank you," said she; and she sat down. But she felt incapable of talking—incapable of sitting still, with her hands before her. General conversation of a more comfortable and conventional kind than that which she had interrupted was set going all around her. [229]

The lovers resumed their *tête-à-tête* in the corner; the chess-players continued their game; Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Hardy, suffering from a very justifiable suspicion that they had been a trifle rude, endeavoured to make themselves particularly entertaining. But she sat silent and miserable with downcast eyes, picking at the embroidery on her dress, and wishing the evening over—this disappointing evening which had counteracted all the brightness and pleasure of the day—so that she could slip away to bed.

"You have had no tea," said Mr. Dalrymple presently, when all the married ladies were absorbed in discussing the merits of their respective cooks. "It came in while you were out of the room. Won't you have some now?" [230]

Grateful for any interruption of the spell of embarrassment which was holding her painfully under his watchful eyes, she thanked him, and rising hastily went over to one of the numerous recesses of that charmingly arranged room, where the evening tea-table usually stood between a curtained archway and a glass door that led into the conservatory.

Of course he followed her. The curtains were looped back so as to permit the glow of lamps and firelight to stream in from the room, and on the other side a full moon shone palely down through a network of flowering shrubs and fern trees. They could hear the conversation of the rest distinctly—particularly Mrs. Hale's share of it. But it was a very retired place. [231]

"You had better sit down," said Mr. Dalrymple, "and let me pour it out for you. Yes—I do it every night for my sister. She, too, likes to have the teapot brought in. But I doubt if it is fit to drink; it has been in half an hour. I thought you were tired and had gone to bed."

"Did you?"

"Yes; I am afraid you *are* very tired. You ought not to have come back."

"I—I wish I had not," she said, hardly above a whisper, as she took the cup from his hands. She looked into his face for a moment with her timid, troubled eyes, and then looked down hastily and blushed her brightest scarlet. [232]

"I know, I know," he replied, in a low tone of emotion that had a touch of fierceness in it. "I saw how shocked you were, and I could have bitten my tongue out. But I should never have spoken of *that* if Mrs. Hale had not badgered me into it. If it had been one of the men—but they know better! A woman, though she may be the most prodigious fool, is privileged. I am very sorry. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

"It is not *hearing* it that matters," stammered Rachel, stirring her tea with wild and tremulous splashes; "it is knowing—it is thinking—of its being true."

He paused for a moment, and looked at her with a look that she was afraid to meet, but which she *felt* through all her shrinking consciousness: and then he said quietly. "Drink your tea, and let us go into the conservatory for five minutes." [233]

It was a bold proposal under the circumstances; but it did not occur to her to question it. She drank her tea hastily, and put down her cup; and Mr. Dalrymple opened the glass door, which swung on noiseless hinges, and passing out after her, coolly closed it behind them both. It was very dim and still out there. The steam of the warm air, full of strong earthy and piney odours, clung to the glass roofs through which the moon was shining, and made the light vague and misty. The immense brown stems of the tree ferns, barnacled with stag horns, and the great green feathers spreading and drooping above them, took all kinds of phantom shapes. [234]

Rachel herself looked like a ghost in her white dress, as she flitted down the dim alleys by that tall man's side, tapping the tiled floor with her slippered feet with no more noise than a woodpecker.

"Is that the lapageria?" asked Mr. Dalrymple, when he thought they had gone far enough for privacy, pausing beside a comfortable seat, and pointing upward to a lattice-work of dark leaved shoots, from which hung clusters of dusky flower bells. "How well it grows here, to be sure!"

"Everything grows well here," responded Rachel, relieved from some restraint by this harmless opening of their clandestine *tête-à-tête*; "and that creeper is Mr. Thornley's favourite. The flowers are the loveliest red in daylight." [235]

"Now I want to tell you a little about that story you heard just now," he proceeded gravely. "Sit down; it won't take long."

"You said you would rather not talk about it," murmured Rachel.

"I would much rather not. There is nothing I would not sooner do—except let you go away thinking so badly of me as you do now. I don't usually care what people think of me," he added; "I am sure I don't know why I should care now. But you looked so terribly shocked! It hurts me to see you looking at me in that way. And I should like to try if I could to make you believe that I am not necessarily a bad man, more than other men, though bad enough, because I fought a duel once and killed my adversary." [236]

"*Meaning* to kill him," interposed Rachel. "That is the dreadful part of it!"

"Yes; I meant to kill him. I staked my own life on the same chance, if that is any justification, but—oh, yes, I meant to kill him, if I could. I had a reason for that, Miss Fetherstonhaugh. Shall I tell you what it was?"

"Yes," whispered Rachel. "But how *could* there be any sufficient reason for such a terrible crime?"

"Don't call it a crime," he protested. "That is how they speak of it who know nothing about it—[237] that is how they will represent all my life, which has been different from theirs—to make you shun and shrink from me as if I had the small-pox. Wait till you know a little more."

He was leaning forward with an elbow on his knee, and looking into her face. She met his eyes now in the uncertain moonlight, which was shining on her and not on him; and he saw no sign of shrinking yet.

"Why did you do it?" she asked sorrowfully.

"Long ago," he said, after a pause, "he and I fell in love with—some one; and she loved him best. At least I think she did—I don't know. Sometimes I fancy she would have cared most for me, if we [238] had had our chances. But we had no chances; I had to give my word of honour not to stand between her and him—not to try to win her, unless she distinctly showed a preference for me."

"I understand," whispered Rachel. She knew this part of the story already.

"At any rate," he continued, "she made choice of him. He sold out of the service, and they went away together. I had sold out myself not long before, and went away too—travelling about the world. I was very lonely at that time; I didn't much care where I went or what became of me. It was several years before I saw or heard of her again."

"Yes?"

"And one night, when I had come back home to look after my property, I met her in London [239] streets. It was the middle of winter—it was raining—she was all alone—she was almost in rags—"

"Don't tell me any more!" implored Rachel, beginning to tremble and cry.

"No," he said, and he drew a deep long breath, "I *can't* tell you any more. Only this—she died. I did all I could to save her, but it was too late. She died of consumption—brought on by exposure and want, and misery of all sorts—a week or two after I found her. And now you know why I killed him. *That* was why!"

There was a long pause, broken once or twice by Rachel's audible emotion. She had still her own views as to the right and justice of what he had done; but she did not dream of the presumption [240] of giving them now.

This tremendous tragedy of love and revenge dwarfed all her theories of life to the merest trivialities. She could only wonder, and tremble, and cry.

"It is an old story now," said Mr. Dalrymple, more gently. "And I try not to think too much of it. It was all fair, thank Heaven!—I comfort myself with that. I could have shot him once before in Canada; but he was unprepared then. He did not see me, and I would not take him at a disadvantage. I try not to think of it now. I don't want you to think of it either—after to-night. Will you try not to? And try not to let them persuade you that I am quite a fiend in human shape?" [241]

Rachel blew her nose for the last time, put her handkerchief in her pocket, and smiled a tearful smile.

"I am afraid you are not very good," she said, shaking her head, "but I know you can't be a really wicked man."

"How do you know it?" he asked eagerly.

"How? I'm sure I don't know—I feel it."

"Thank you, thank you," he said, in a low, rapid under tone. "You don't know how I thank you for saying that. At any rate, I have *some* rudimental morality. I am honest, to the best of my power. I tell no lies to myself, or to any man—or woman. What I say I mean, and what I do I own to—if [242] called upon, that is. You may trust me that far. And I *hope* you will."

"I will," said Rachel, without a moment's hesitation.

How often they thought afterwards of their first strange talk, all alone in that shadowy place. It was as if they had known one another in some other world, and had met after long absence; they felt—widely unlike as they were—so little as strangers usually do beginning a conventional acquaintance in the conventional way. However, it did occur to both of them that it would be as well to go back to the drawing-room before they should be missed.

"I am glad to have had this opportunity," said Mr. Dalrymple, who rose first. "I shall hope—I shall [243] feel sure—that you will not let yourself be prejudiced unfairly by anything you may hear. For the rest, I hope you will try not to think of this painful story again."

And he began to saunter back, and she to saunter beside him.

As they entered the drawing-room by the glass door, they heard Mrs. Hardy calling:

"Rachel! Rachel! Why, where is Rachel gone to?"

The girl glided into the broad, warm light, a little confused and dazzled, and, of course, dyed in blushes, which deepened to the deepest pink of oleanders—nay, to the still richer red of that lapageria which had attracted Mr. Dalrymple's attention just now—as she became conscious of [244] the curious observation of the assembled guests, who, she well knew, would not regard this characteristic demonstration as lightly as those did who knew her.

"I am here, Aunt Elizabeth," she replied, in an abject voice, as if she had been caught in something very disgraceful.

"Oh!" responded Mrs. Hardy, "I thought you were gone to bed." She looked sharply at the girl's downcast face, and then more sharply at Mr. Dalrymple, who met her eyes with a stately and distant air of not putting himself to the trouble of remembering who she was that she found very offensive and aggravating. "You had better go, my dear," she said peremptorily. "It is late, and [245] you have had a tiring day. I shall be having Mr. Kingston complaining if I let you knock yourself up."

Rachel was only too glad to say good night and go. The other ladies began to rise and stir about, gathering up fans and fancy work, but she left the room before they had come to any unanimous decision about separating. Mr. Dalrymple held open the door for her. "Good night," she whispered hurriedly, not looking at him. He answered by a strong pressure of her hand in silence. She did not understand it then, but looking back afterwards she knew that that first brief hand-clasp stirred her erstwhile latent woman's soul to life. She was never the same afterwards.

Half an hour later, when she was sitting by her own fireside, dreamily brushing her long auburn [246] hair over a blue dressing-gown (blue was her specially becoming colour), Mrs. Hardy tapped at her door, and entered.

"I have brought you a little wine and water, dear," said she, looking very friendly and amiable. "I know you seldom take it, but to-night it will do you good. And Lucilla says you are to be sure not to get up to breakfast if you feel tired in the morning."

"Oh, thank you, auntie, but you know I *never* lie in bed! And I am not in the very *least* tired. I have had a delightful day."

"Yes; it has been a pleasant day. I am glad you have enjoyed it so much. I am only sorry we had to [247] bring that Mr. Dalrymple back with us. I consider him a most objectionable, a most disreputable, young man—not so very young either; he will never see forty again, unless I am much mistaken. But Lucilla and Mr. Thornley are both so much attached to Mrs. Digby; for her sake they are obliged to be civil to him."

Rachel was silent.

"You will, however, be careful, dear, I know, not to get more intimate with him than necessary," Mrs. Hardy continued. "Mr. Kingston would dislike it very much. He is a very wild young man—he has not at all a good character."

"You said Mr. Kingston was wild, auntie," the girl suggested timidly. It was her sole feeble effort [248] in defence of her absent friend.

"Nonsense! I'm sure I said nothing of the kind. He is a man whom everybody looks up to. There is no question of comparison between them. At any rate," she added, with solemn severity, "Mr. Kingston has not taken a fellow-creature's life, as this man has. *That* is reason enough why we must none of us have more to do with him than is absolutely necessary. You will remember that, Rachel? Be civil to him, my dear, of course, but no more. I should not have allowed you to come into contact with such a man if I could have helped it, and we had no idea of seeing him to-day. However, they will all be gone after to-morrow, and you need not recognise him again. The [249] Digbys are coming to the dance next week, but Mrs. Hale says he means to start again for Queensland on Monday. Let us hope they won't break their traces a second time. Good night, my dear; you will remember what I say? It is what Mr. Kingston would wish if he were here, I know."

And Mrs. Hardy kissed her niece affectionately and went away to bed, with a sense of having done her duty, and without the least suspicion that as a domestic diplomatist, she had covered herself with disgrace.

[250]

CHAPTER XI.

MR. DALRYMPLE HAS TO CONSULT GORDON.

OF course it is well understood, without further explanation, that Mr. Dalrymple and Rachel were in the position of the Sleeping Beauty and her prince when the spell that held life in abeyance was—or was about to be—broken. At the same time it is not to be inferred that the man, with his years and experience, fell in love at first sight with a merely pretty face, nor that the girl was more than ordinarily impressionable and [251] inconstant, or had any constitutional weakness for wild young men.

Perhaps it is not necessary to essay the difficult task of finding a theory to account for it. Everybody knows that if there is a law of nature that will not lend itself to system, it is that which governs these affairs.

The greatest force and factor in human life comes to birth by a mere chance—in Roden Dalrymple's case by the breaking of a trace, which was in itself the result of a whole series of trivial and quite avoidable circumstances; and then it thrives or languishes by the favour of petty accidents—until time and sanctifying associations put it beyond the reach of accident. That is its [252] superficial history, taking a general average.

Quality and potency are questions of temperament; vigour of growth depends in great measure on what may be called climatic influences. But, as with some other great mysteries of this world, human understanding can make very little of it.

At the same time people do not fall in love with each other absolutely without rhyme or reason. And these two did not. Of course personal appearance had, in the first instance, something to do with it.

To a girl of Rachel's disposition (or, indeed, of any other disposition), nothing in the whole catalogue of manly graces could have been more captivating than that quiet air of power and dignity which was the chief characteristic of her hero's person and bearing. [253]

And Mr. Dalrymple, who was not the kind of man to be at any time insensible to the charm of a sweet face, had had sufficient experience to understand and appreciate the peculiar charm of this one—its unaffected modesty and candour; and he had had, moreover, little of anything to charm him in his later wandering years.

And Rachel was not merely a pretty girl, by any means. Being of a most unselfish, unassuming, kindly nature, and having a subtle apprehension of the general fitness of things, her manners were exceedingly gracious and winning—not always conventional, perhaps, but always refined and modest; and that honest youthful enthusiasm for life and its good things, which more or less [254] flavoured all she said and did, though inimical to the prejudices of the British matron, was a charming thing to men.

Then Mr. Dalrymple had the faculty to perceive what made her look at him with so peculiarly wistful and earnest a look; he recognised his friend, if not his love and mate, in the earliest hours of their acquaintance. A friend in so fair a shape was doubly a friend naturally; and the strong appetite that he had for friendship, as a rudimental phase of passion, had had little to feed on but bitter memories for more than a dozen years.

As for Rachel, it was almost inevitable that she should lose her heart to this hero of romance—this Paladin with a touch of the demon in him—whom circumstances combined to present to her [255] under such singularly impressive auspices. If the truth must be told, she fell in love much more suddenly and hopelessly than he did; and the fates—incarnate in the persons of his enemies—did their best to precipitate the catastrophe.

On the morning following their strange interview in the conservatory—of which she had been dreaming all night—she awoke with a dim sense of something being wrong. It was so very dim a sense that she did not consciously apprehend it, and therefore made no investigation into its origin. But instead of jumping out of bed as usual, eager to plunge at once into the unknown joys of a new day, she lay still until obliged to get up to receive her tea, and gazed pensively into [256] vacancy.

It was just such a morning as yesterday—the sun shining in through the white blind, the fresh wind rustling along the leafy verandahs, the magpies gossiping cheerily in great flocks about the garden; and there was that sweetest baby cooing like a little wood pigeon as he was carried past her door in his nurse's arms. But she was deaf to these erewhile potent influences.

"Your hot water, miss," quoth a housemaid in the passage.

"Thank you, Susan," she responded absently, and continued to gaze into vacancy.

"Your tea, miss," came, with another tap, presently.

And then it was she had to get out of bed. She took in her tea, set it down on a chair and forgot it; [257]
she put on her slippers and dressing-gown, and armed herself with towel and sponge, but had to make three visits to the bath-room before she could get in.

Then she woke up to the fact that she was late, and scampered excitedly about the room in her anxiety to make a becoming toilet in the shortest possible space of time. Finally, she went to breakfast five minutes after the gong was supposed to have assembled the family, and found that the gentlemen had all gone out early on a shooting expedition.

"Isn't it too bad?" exclaimed Miss Hale. "They arranged it in the smoking-room last night, after [258]
we were gone to bed; and Harold *knew* that we wanted to play croquet."

Croquet, it may be remarked, had not yet "gone out," and Harold was Mr. Lessel.

"They had their breakfast at six o'clock," said Mrs. Thornley, smiling. "And you know, dear Miss Hale, it is nearly the last day of the open season, and my husband has been trying to preserve those lagoons in the forest on purpose. There were a great many ducks there last week, and they will have good sport and enjoy themselves, I hope. They said they would be back to luncheon."

"Oh, don't you believe it!" snorted Mrs. Hale, who, having given her lord orders to stay at home, [259]
which had been grossly violated, was in an aggrieved and aggressive mood. "*I* know them!—never a thought will they give to luncheon, or to us either, until they are tired of their sport. If they are in time for dinner, that's quite as much as you can expect."

Rachel sat down, feeling fully as much as anybody the blank that the five gentlemen had left behind them. She did not exactly say to herself that it had been waste of time and trouble to put fresh frills into her dress, but that was the nature of her sentiments.

It was not a lively morning. None of them expected it would be, so they were not disappointed. The matrons beguiled the dull hours with sympathetic gossip on domestic themes.

Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Hardy had a banquet of Melbourne news and scandal, in the discussion of [260]
which they incidentally glorified their respective connections, each for the other's edification, until a suggestion of Mrs. Hale's (to the effect that Mr. Kingston was not much better than he should be, in spite of his wealth) caused a slight coolness to arise between them.

Mrs. Thornley and Mrs. Digby, both young wives and mothers, with many tender interests in common, whispered pleasantly over their needlework, chiefly of their nursery affairs.

The two girls had no resource but to keep each other company. They went first to see the baby; [261]
but Miss Hale was not an enthusiast in babies. Then they had a little music; and here Rachel did not greatly distinguish herself.

After that they walked about the garden and talked. Rachel was told all about Mr. Lessel—how charming and how good he was—what his father meant to settle on him when he married—when the wedding was to be, and what the bridesmaids were to wear. Then she was enticed into a few reluctant confidences about her own engagement, which led to a detailed description of the new house, and an invitation to Miss Hale, when she should be Mrs. Lessel, to pay a visit there some day with her husband. And so the morning wore away, and luncheon-time came.

They waited luncheon until past two o'clock, and, to the sombre satisfaction of Mrs. Hale, the [262]
sportsmen did not return, and the made dishes were spoiled.

Then the mail arrived, and there was a letter for Rachel from her *fiancé*, begging her to write at once to relieve his mind of a fear that she was ill, and to tell him at the same time that she acquiesced in the arrangements he had proposed for their early marriage, and whether she preferred Sydney or Tasmania for the introductory wedding trip.

He particularly wanted her to settle these little matters without further delay, as the spring was so much the pleasantest time for travelling, and he had had the offer of a charming house in Sydney, on the shores of the bay, for the first two or three weeks in October, which would only be [263]
open for a few days.

When she had read this letter, she was in a frantic hurry to answer it. Holding it in her hand, she excused herself to her companions, who were all setting forth for a gentle walk; begging to be allowed to stay at home with an anxious eagerness that provoked significant and indulgent smiles, which said, "Oh, pray don't mind us," as plainly as smiles could speak.

So when they were gone, she made herself comfortable in the smoking-room, in one of the screened compartments of which there was a sort of public writing-table, supplied with great bowls of ink, and sheafs of pens, and reams of paper, on which "Adelonga" was printed—as if [264]
Adelonga had been a club—for the use of all-comers; and where there was always a glorious fire of big logs whenever there was the least excuse for a fire.

Here she began her second letter to Mr. Kingston—with effusive conciliatory excuses for having been such a very bad correspondent. She had really been so much engaged—time had slipped

away, she didn't know how—the post had gone once or twice without her knowing it—yesterday they had been away from home; altogether, fate had been against her writing as often as she had intended, but she would promise him to be more regular in future.

Then followed a description of the races, and an enumeration of the guests they had brought back with them—who they all were, what they were like, and her estimation of them respectively. [265] One was dismissed without comment—"and a Mr. Dalrymple, Mrs. Digby's brother" (and of course her dearest Graham remarked the extreme simplicity of this phrase, and was curious about the interesting details that were conspicuous by their absence). And then, after a few inquiries about the progress of the house, she plunged into the really important matter.

"I have been thinking about your proposal a *great* deal, and I want you, *please*, not to be angry with me if I cannot accede to it," she began in an abject and deprecating manner that was significant of her state of mind. "I want to stay a little longer with my dear aunt, to whom I have had so little opportunity as yet of making what return is in my power for all her kindness to me; [266] and I want a little time to improve myself, too, for my future position as your wife, dear Graham. Lucilla is a beautiful housekeeper and is teaching me lots of things; and I am brushing up my French and German with Miss O'Hara, who said my accent (but it is much better now) was enough to set one's teeth on edge. Moreover, I am *really* too young to be married just yet. I am hardly nineteen, and Laura Buxton was nineteen and a half. Perhaps next year——"

At this point she was interrupted by the arrival of the sportsmen. They had been to the drawing-room, apparently, for they came in by way of the conservatory, through a door just opposite the writing-table. She put down her pen and rose in haste.

"Hullo, Rachel! Good-morning, my dear. Don't get up—we won't disturb you," shouted Mr. [267] Thornley, cheerily. "Come in, Lessel—come in, Dalrymple. Here's where the guns go."

"What sport have you had? And are you not very hungry?" she asked, moving away from her chair and standing on the hearthrug. According to her primitive ideas of propriety, she was bound to stay a little while and see to their hospitable entertainment, there being no proper hostess available.

"Hungry? I should think so. And we had very good sport, though not much to show for it," responded Mr. Thornley. "Only five ducks to five guns, and Dalrymple shot four of them. They are wild enough at the best of times; but at the end of the season there is no getting near them." [268]

"You must be a very good shot," she said, lifting her eyes meekly to Mr. Dalrymple's face. And then, the moment the words were spoken, she would have given worlds to recall them, and looked at him again with a dumb entreaty to be forgiven.

He smiled gently, reading her like a book.

"Oh, no," he said; "I was only lucky in having the birds."

They all came round her as she stood on the hearthrug, except Mr. Thornley, who had gone to order some bread and cheese and beer; and they looked pleased with the situation.

Mr. Digby began to tell her what a lovely day it was, and to ask her why she had not gone out for [269] a walk, too; and then, when she explained that she had had letters to write, and found herself, unfortunately, unable to do so without blushing over it (blushing because she feared she was *going* to blush), Mr. Hale broke in; and Mr. Hale in conversation was, in his very different way, worse than Mrs. Hale.

"To Melbourne, I presume?" insinuated this little monster, with an arch smile. Rachel, the colour of a peony, lifted her head an inch nearer to the ceiling.

"I only heard last night," he continued, rubbing his hands, and looking a whole volume of vulgar pleasantries, "that the redoubtable Kingston has been vanquished at last, and that it is to your bow and spear that he has fallen. Allow me to congratulate you, Miss Fetherstonhaugh." [270]

"To congratulate *him*, I should think you mean," broke in Mr. Dalrymple, who was studying the effect of sunset on a picture of the Adelonga homestead and pulling his moustaches violently. "Hadn't we better go and wash our hands, Digby, and make ourselves more fit for ladies' company?"

"To congratulate him, too, certainly," said Mr. Hale; "very much so, of course. But still it is a great conquest on the part of Miss Fetherstonhaugh. Perhaps you don't know Kingston?"

"I have not that honour," replied Mr. Dalrymple stiffly; and the tone of his voice strongly implied that he did not in the least degree desire it.

"Well, I do; and I know that he has openly defied the combined powers of her charming sex for—I [271] am afraid to say how many years—as long as I can remember."

"I daresay that has not distressed them," said Mr. Dalrymple.

"Come, come, Hale," said Mr. Digby, who thought his kinsman's allusion to Mr. Kingston's age a terrible slip of the tongue; "let us go and wash our hands. Come along, Lessel."

"And my wife tells me," continued the irrepressible little man, "that the—a—the interesting event is to take place very shortly!"

Rachel came out of her majestic reticence with a rush that astonished everybody.

"Oh, *no*, Mr. Hale—not for a *long* time—not for a year, at the very least! Who *could* have told Mrs. [272]
Hale such a thing? I assure you it is quite, quite wrong! *Do* you know who told her? Was it my aunt?"

She looked at him with an earnest, imploring look that aroused Mr. Dalrymple to regard her with considerably sharpened interest. The alarming thought had struck her that her lover might have privately enlisted Mrs. Hardy's support for his new scheme; and if so, how should she be able to resist so formidable a pressure?

"I think it was Mrs. Thornley told Mrs. Hale. She had a letter from her sister, Mrs. Reade, yesterday; and Mrs. Reade had mentioned it. Ladies' gossip, Miss Fetherstonhaugh!—ladies never can keep secrets, you know. They tell everything to one another, and then to us. And we— [273]
we tell them nothing. We know better, eh, Digby?"

"Come along," said Digby, who was getting a little savage, "and don't talk like a fool."

At this critical juncture Mr. Thornley appeared to announce that there was bread and cheese in the dining-room for anybody who was hungry. Whereupon the men trooped out—all but Mr. Dalrymple, who apparently was not hungry. He was lounging at Rachel's side, with an elbow on the mantelpiece, pulling his moustache meditatively; and he did not move.

Rachel was fluttered and excited.

"How *do* people get hold of those things?" she exclaimed, with a vexed, embarrassed laugh. "It is very true that everybody knows one's business better than one does one's self. I *hate* that kind of [274]
impertinent gossip. No one has the *least* ground for supposing that I am going to be married shortly. I have no intention of being married for ever so long."

"Why do you care what people say?" said Mr. Dalrymple. "I never care. It is much the best plan."

"I would not, if I could help it; but I can't," she responded, turning round and mechanically spreading her pink palms to the fire.

"And, after all," he continued, slowly, "all the talking in the world can't make you marry if you don't want to."

She did not look up, but the blood flew over her face.

"I did not say I didn't want to," she murmured. "Of course I want to—not yet, for a long time, but [275]
some day—or I should not be engaged."

"I don't think that *always* follows, Miss Fetherstonhaugh. I think many people engage themselves, and live to think better of it. And then, if they don't refuse to consummate an admitted mistake, they—well, they ought to, that's all. Forgive me, I am speaking in the abstract of course. I have had a great deal of experience, you know."

"Of broken engagements?" queried Rachel, smiling faintly at the fire.

"No, not of them—not personally. The curse of my life was an engagement that was kept. And I have seen so much misery, such everlasting wreck and ruin, come upon people I have known and cared for—people who kept the letter of the law of honour and disregarded the spirit—who [276]
preferred sacrificing all that made life worth having, for certainly two people, and probably four, to breaking an engagement that had no longer any sense or reason in it."

"But surely an engagement—it is the initial marriage ceremony—should be kept sacred," protested Rachel, daring at last to look up, in defence of pious principles.

"Yes," he said, "certainly—when it is *really* the initial marriage ceremony."

"And how—what—what is the proof of that?"

"Shall I tell you what I think it is? When the people who are engaged long and weary for the consummation—for the time to be over which keeps them from one another." [277]

There was a dead silence. Rachel continued to gaze into the fire, but her eyes were dim, and all her pretty colour sank out of her face. He had given her a great shock, and she had to take a little time to recover. Presently she looked up, pale and grave, with a fuller and more open look than she had ever given him.

"You should not have told me," she said gently; "you should not talk to me so."

"No—you are right—I should not—forgive me," he replied, speaking low and hurriedly, with something new and strange in his voice. And then they became simultaneously aware of the dangerous ways into which their discussion had led them, and, by tacit consent, turned back. [278]
Rachel moved away to the writing-table, and began to gather her papers together; Mr. Dalrymple brought his arm down from the chimney-piece and looked at his watch.

"It is five o'clock," he said; "the ladies are having a long walk, are they not?"

"No; it was nearly four when they started. They will be in directly for their tea."

Then, without looking to right or left, Rachel hurried out of the room; and Mr. Dalrymple, after

silently holding the door for her, strode away to the dining-room, where he was still in time for some bread and cheese.

The first thing Rachel did on reaching her room, was to sit down and cry—why or wherefore she never asked herself. She had not yet learned the art of analysing her emotions. [279]

She felt vaguely perplexed and hurt, and ashamed and indignant; and a few tears were necessary to put her to rights. They were very few, and soon over.

In less than ten minutes she had again addressed herself to Mr. Kingston's letter, which she finished up with the suggestion that their marriage should take place "next year," and a profusion of unwonted endearments.

At dusk she went to the drawing-room, where the reunited guests were having tea in the pleasant firelight, the gentlemen lounging about in their knickerbockers and leggings, the ladies sitting with hats tilted on the back of their heads, Mrs. Hale victorious over her subdued husband. Miss Hale happy with her recovered beau. She sat a little outside the circle and talked in under-tones to Lucilla; Mr. Dalrymple stood far away on the other side of the room, and talked to nobody. [280]

That night Rachel was the first to go to dress; she was the last to come back when the gong announced dinner. And when she came she was arrayed in all her glory—pearl necklace, diamond pendant, diamond bracelet, jewelled fan—all her absent lover's love-gifts that good taste permitted her to wear, and a few more. And there was no repetition of the conservatory scene.

Mrs. Hardy was perfectly satisfied with the result of her diplomatic measures. Rachel sat by her aunt's side, and sewed industriously all the evening at a pinafore for her precious baby, who was about to be short-coated. Mr. Dalrymple sat rather apart, gnawing his moustache, apparently absorbed in a photographic album of Lucilla's, which he had discovered in a cabinet near him. [281]

Two or three times, when Rachel stole a look across the room, unable to repress her restless curiosity to know what he was doing, she saw him gazing meditatively at this open book, and always on the first page of it. She wondered whose photographs they were that interested him so much, and she felt that she could not go to bed without satisfying her anxiety on this point. [282]

When after tea, music and cards and other gentle entertainments were set going, and Mr. Dalrymple was at last enticed by his host from his corner and his album to make a fourth at the whist-table, she watched her opportunity and stole round to the chair on which he had been sitting. He had his back to her, but he was facing a mirror in which he could see her distinctly; and while he watched her movements, he trumped his partner's trick for the first time in his life, and otherwise disgraced a notorious reputation.

"I suppose," said Mrs. Hale, who was his partner, with considerable asperity, "that you don't trouble to play well if you haven't some great stake to play for." [283]

"I beg your pardon," he replied, gravely bending his head. Rachel was stealing back to her aunt's side and her baby's pinafore, and he left off looking into the mirror and making mistakes.

Meanwhile Rachel had satisfied her curiosity. When she opened the album on the first page she saw two familiar faces—one of a young, bright girl, with pensive eyes, conspicuous for "that royalty which subjects kings;" the other angular, aquiline, hollow, full of the lines of age, and smirking with the sprightliness of youth—herself and Mr. Kingston, to whom, unknown to her, Lucilia had lately given this place of honour.

She stood still for a few minutes, looking down on them, with the colour deepening in her cheeks. She seemed to see for the first time how incongruous a pair they made, and how mean a presence her lover really bore. [284]

It was a bad likeness of him, she said to herself; but in point of fact she was shocked by a faithful representation of his meagre features and his peculiar smile—which after all was too frivolous and artificial to be worthy of comparison with the smile of Mephistopheles.

She did not consciously judge his by the standard of that other face, which was so impressively dignified and resolute; but she had looked at this same photograph two days ago, and then it had not struck her unpleasantly, as it did now. [285]

Without thinking what she was doing, she tore out her own likeness, and also the last photograph in the book, which was an old one of her Cousin Lucilla as a child, and she made them change places. Having effected which—surreptitiously, as she thought—she closed the album softly, laid it away in the cabinet, and returned to her seat by her aunt's side.

When the ladies were gone to bed, the first thing Mr. Dalrymple did was to get out that album again and look at it; and he had some very serious thoughts when he found out what she had done.

In the morning all the visitors left early, for they had a long distance to travel. Mr. Thornley was to take them part of the way home, and the break and the four horses were brought round at eight o'clock. Rachel came out to the verandah with her aunt and cousin to see them start. [286]

"Good-bye, dear Mrs. Digby," said Lucilla, affectionately kissing her particular friend. "Good-bye, Mrs. Hale. Good-bye, Miss Hale. I am so sorry you could not stay longer, but we shall expect you back next week. Good-bye, Mr. Dalrymple, I hear you are off to Queensland again on Monday?"

Mr. Dalrymple shook hands and lifted his hat, and then said very quietly, but with great distinctness, "Not quite so soon as that, I think, Mrs. Thornley. I shall consult Gordon before I make another start."

"Oh, well, in that case we shall hope to see you again, too. Of course you'll come with your sister next week, if you *should* be still with her?" [287]

"Thank you," said Mr. Dalrymple. "I shall be most happy."

Rachel was not looking at anybody in particular; and nobody was looking at her. But her rather pale and pensive face suddenly became of a colour that might have put even the lapageria rosea to shame.

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[288]

CHAPTER XII.

"OH, IF THEY HAD!"

WANDERING about that afternoon in an aimless and restless manner, Rachel entered the drawing-room through the conservatory door, and found her cousin sitting there alone, at her own little davenport, writing letters. Lucilla looked up with a smile of cordial welcome.

"Do you know what I am doing?" she exclaimed brightly. "Come here, and say thank you. I am writing to ask Mr. Kingston to come." [289]

"To ask Mr. Kingston to come?" the girl repeated blankly. "What for, Lucilla?"

Mrs. Thornley was not like Mrs. Reade; she was amiable and sweet, but a little dull of apprehension. She did not grasp the obvious significance of this reply. Still it struck her as inadequate.

"Why, my dear child, what a question! Because you are here, of course, and because he is moping about town, Beatrice says, and doesn't know what to do with himself."

"Does Beatrice say that?" inquired Rachel, with a little pang of self-reproach. This man, who had done her the greatest honour, who had paid her the highest compliment that any man could bestow on any woman—she was conscious of requiting him with ingratitude at this moment. "He is very, very—kind," she faltered. "I am afraid he thinks too much about me. When have you asked him to come, Lucilla?" [290]

"In time for the dance next week, and as much sooner as he likes. I have told him to send word what day will suit him, if he can come, and that we will send to the station. Of course we could not allow *him* to come up by coach. I am very glad we have that dance in prospect; it will be something to amuse him. I should have been half afraid to ask him into the country if there had been nothing going on. He used to hate the bush. However," looking up archly, "Beatrice says I need not be afraid of his feeling dull on this occasion." [291]

"Did Beatrice tell you to ask him? I mean did she suggest it to you?"

"Yes, dear—to tell the truth. I should not have asked him, simply because I knew he didn't like the bush. It did not occur to me that he would be fretting after you—Mr. Kingston fretting after anybody is such a very novel idea! Oh, my dear Rachel"—and here she drew the girl close and kissed her—"you are luckier than ever I thought you were!"

"Yes," sighed Rachel; "I know I am very lucky."

"And Beatrice says," continued Mrs. Thornley, with her arm round her cousin's waist, "that we [292]

shall be having everything settled soon, and that you are to have a delightful tour in Europe. How you will enjoy that! It was the one thing I wished for when I was married that I did not get. Not but what," the gentle woman added quickly, "I am very glad I did not get it now. I could not have been happier than I have been at Adelonga, and it must be very inconvenient to have a baby when one is travelling about. You must tell me, darling, what you would like for a present. John and I were talking about it last night—John thinks a great deal of you, you must know, which is a thing you ought to be proud of, for he is very particular and critical about girls—and he says he [293] would like to give you something worth having. But I told him you and I would talk it over before we decided what it should be."

"How good you are! How good everybody is!" exclaimed Rachel, folding the girlish matron in a rather hysterical embrace. "But I don't think I shall be married just yet, Lucilla—wait till we hear what Mr. Kingston says."

"Oh, we know already what *he* is going to say."

"There is the party to be thought of first," proceeded Rachel, determined, now that Mr. Kingston was coming, not to dissipate in fruitless skirmishes the strength that she would require to fight the inevitable battle with him. "You have only a week before you, and you have not sent out your [294] invitations, have you?"

"Yes, I have. I did that the day you were at the races, and have had answers to some of them. We shall get about thirty or forty people together, I hope—perhaps more. I wonder, by the way, whether Mr. Dalrymple could bring that friend of his, Mr. Jim Gordon—I *wish* I had thought to ask him. We have too large a proportion of married people, unfortunately." Lucilla had become thoughtful and business-like. "Seven bachelors altogether," she remarked musingly, after a pause; "that is not nearly enough. Does Mr. Kingston dance now, Rachel?"

"Yes, but not a great deal—mostly quadrilles. I think," she added, reflectively, "he is rather [295] troubled with gout in one of his knees."

"Poor fellow! He waltzed with me I remember when I first came out, and that's not very long ago. Surely *he* can't have gout—a man who walks with such a peculiarly light and airy tread! Though, to be sure, I knew a man of twenty-five—or was it thirty-five?—who had gout badly."

"Perhaps it is rheumatism," suggested Rachel; "or lumbago."

"Nonsense. Lumbago, indeed! One would think he was a patriarch. But if he doesn't waltz——"

Lucilla paused in perplexity.

"Does Mr. Gordon waltz?" Rachel meekly inquired.

"Oh, no doubt—sure to. I have never seen him, but all those old army men dance well." [296]

"Then I suppose Mr. Dalrymple dances well?"

"Of course he does. Poor fellow, he excels in everything that is of no consequence. Oh, yes, Mr. Dalrymple is decidedly an acquisition in a ball-room, whatever he may be elsewhere."

"Lucilla!"

"What, dear?"

"Why do you all speak of him in that hard way? You are so kind to everybody else, but for him nobody seems to have a good word. I think it is so cruel!" she broke out with sudden passion. "The way Mrs. Hale insulted him the other night—a man like that, whom she was not fit to [297] associate with—and all of you sitting round and letting her do it—I think it is dreadful!"

"Oh, my dear," responded Mrs. Thornley, with tremulous earnestness, a little frightened at the vehemence that she was too dull to understand, and deeply shocked by the implied reflection on her hospitality, "you don't suppose we encouraged or defended Mrs. Hale? We were as vexed as you were at her gross want of taste—of common courtesy, one might say. John was excessively angry—with dear Mrs. Digby sitting by to hear it all; he said at first that he would never have her in his house again."

"But he is going to have her?"

"Yes. Well, they are old neighbours you see, and related to the Digbys. And I daresay she knows [298] no better."

"She is a horrid woman," said Rachel, viciously; "and so is her husband."

"A horrid woman?" laughed Lucilla. "Oh, no, dear, be just—he is not so bad as that. And you know, Rachel"—becoming gently argumentative—"it is not surprising that people object to a man who has had such a career as Mr. Dalrymple's. You know what he has done?"

"Only fought a duel," said Rachel. "No, I am not defending him, Lucilla, but how many men have done the same in old days, without being objected to?"

"It was a very *bad* duel," said Lucilla gravely. "There were circumstances connected with it that [299] were very disreputable—so they say."

"You shouldn't trust to hearsay," protested the girl eagerly. "Why don't you go by the evidence of your own senses? Does he look like the man to do disreputable things?"

"He looks like a man who could never do anything mean or underhand," said Mrs. Thornley; "I admit that. He has a noble face; and he has perfect manners; and he is clever. But, oh! Rachel, when a man has been in the dock, and for such a crime as that—"

"Do you mean he has been in prison?"

"Of course. He was arrested and put on his trial for murder, or manslaughter—I forget which it was called. He was acquitted we know, but by the merest accident. Popular feeling was with him, [300] strange to say, and Mr. Gordon fought hard for him. They were not over particular in California, I suppose, and there was a flaw somewhere. But he *might* have been hung, Rachel! That is where it is—he was tried for murder, and he *might* have been hung!"

Rachel was leaning against the wall, and looking into the recess that made a passage to the conservatory. She was calling up a vision of that memorable night, which was the birthnight of her womanhood, so recently come and gone—the fern-tree canopy, letting the moonlight through, the little bench, set in a bower of cork and maidenhair, where she sat alone with him in a world [301] of brooding shadows—the strong, proud face, bending forward to look at her, darkly distinct in the soft, green gloom.

And she heard his voice again, incisive, imperious, yet melting her very heart within her as he told her the simple history of this terrible episode in his life. He might have been hung!—he did not tell her that. She stole away from her cousin, and walked up and down the long alleys of the conservatory, pale and passionate with her fierce indignation. Would they indeed have dared to hang him? And if they had—oh, if they had!

Some thirty miles away Mr. Dalrymple was riding by his own short cuts through the bush, with his peaked cap drawn over his eyes. His beautiful horse, tall and stately like himself, with glossy [302] dark coat, and a white star on his forehead, paced with long strides through saplings and brushwood, swinging his head slowly up and down on the loose rein with a rhythmical movement that betokened ease of body and content of mind.

His master gazed heedfully at the brilliant parrots flashing about with long, rushing darts over his head, and at the myriads of wild flowers crushed and trampled under foot. He wore a sprig of epacris in his button-hole, and carried a sheaf of delicate orchids with their stalks tucked under the saddle in front of him.

He hummed a Strauss waltz as he went along through the sunshine and shadows of the waning day, and thought of the time when he would go back to Adelonga and carry that girl with the [303] sweet eyes away in his arms, on the wings of just such a dreamy measure, into the only realisable Utopia of this world.

And perhaps he was more glad of his life than he had ever been since the day when he so nearly lost it—caring not much whether he did so or not.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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