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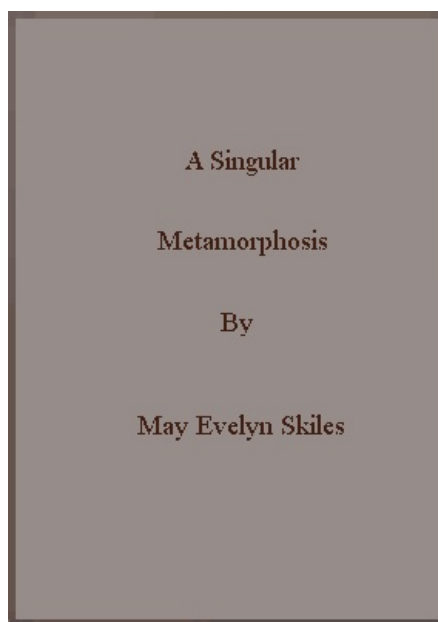
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A Singular Metamorphosis

By

May Evelyn Skiles.

Published in 1902.

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A Singular Metamorphosis.

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERY INTIMATED.

Miss Fiske had lived with the Tracys several years, and her incipient curiosity concerning the mystery pertaining to their household was becoming more obvious, for mystery there certainly was. At specific periods of the year, when she advanced towards certain portions of the old mansion, she had been deterred in her attempts to proceed. It was not that she was more curious than the average mortal, but no matter how devoid of innate curiosity one is, the mere fact that there is something worthy of secrecy immediately produces as a natural sequence a suddenly awakened interest and a consequent desire of exposition.

There were only three occupants of the home: the two Tracys, brother and sister, and Miss Fiske, who had accepted the proffered home on the death of her father, her only near surviving relative. It is true there had been an intimation of loving services that might be rendered in return, to the brother and sister, or, perhaps, she would not have accepted so readily the proffered home without remuneration, though it was evident that they needed none, and would have been sorely wounded by any such offer. Miss Fiske could well have afforded something more substantial than her presence. While the two families were not consanguineous, there had been intermarriages, consequently, more than feelings of friendship existed between them. Mr. Tracy seemed to the girl of twenty-two almost like a father, guardian he had been till she arrived at her majority.

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Sometimes Adelina fancied her life similar to that portrayed by writers of fiction, the old dwelling and its accompanying secretiveness all tending to foster this belief. It is not my wish to leave the impression that such a trivial circumstance could effect a radical transformation in so sensible a young person as the one in question, nor did she linger over these things to the detriment of better thoughts and occupations. There were times, as already mentioned, when it was plain that her presence in the western wing of the house would be an intrusion. The cause of this, try as she would, could not be divined. Everywhere else she was welcomed with joy, for both Harold and Mary Tracy had learned to look upon her as the best gift vouchsafed to their isolated lives; not that they had ever been really unhappy, except at rare intervals, but for years they had held aloof from the social gatherings of Deanmouth, deeming each other's society all-sufficient until the appearance of a third person, who immediately upset that theory, in fact, rejuvenating all that came into contact with her striking personality. Prior to her arrival at Deanmouth, there had indeed been one who had succumbed to her influence. Poor young fellow! He had so long brooded over her refusal to be in turn influenced in like manner by him that his mind had gradually become unbalanced. There had been an attack of fever; hence, the combination of these simultaneous misfortunes—sickness and disappointment—had resulted in the unhinging of a heretofore well balanced mind.

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Had he not been so weakened mentally and physically by this protracted illness, this might never have occurred. With no vitality; indeed, no wish to regain it, what else could have ensued? Miss Fiske was greatly troubled, reproaching herself constantly, yet conscious of her inability to act otherwise—at that time, anyway. Had there since been no regret at the refusal of so great a love? Who will say? none knew of it assuredly; her uniform cheerfulness precluding all thought of regret or longing. Were there more resembling her, and thus endeavoring to ameliorate the woes of others, how far would we be towards the advancement of the evolution which is the outcome of our existence; but far be it from me to intimate that there are not many who daily, hourly, submerge all thought of self in the one desire of abetting others. Was not that one of the ends for which we were created, else why permitted to be companions to those with the same sensibilities as ourselves? Miss Fiske had no notion of embittering her own life or that of others in bewailing the past, in idle conjectures of what might have been; nor did she deem it at all necessary to spend her time in futile surmises as to the future ills that might chance to fall to her lot.

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One day Adelina had returned from her accustomed walk, without finding Mary in her usual place, waiting to welcome her with her peculiarly sweet smile, and ready interest in all that appertained to the life of a young person. Adelina was not to wait long, however, before Mary entered the room, with cheeks flushed with excitement, but if the former expected any disclosures or explanations incident to the cause of this agitation, she was destined to disappointment. Her delicate attempts to elicit information proved futile, and apparently passed unnoticed, for to effect revelations of a personal nature from beings inherently reticent is no facile undertaking. Adelina's question with regard to her friend's welfare met with no response except a rather positive denial as to any indisposition. Such a fact as the discomposure of Mary was unusual enough to call forth comment.

"No, dear; I am always well, except, perhaps, during the two months you are away from me. I am afraid I am very selfish," Mary added, with a loving smile.

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"Dear Mary, the idea of your ever being made selfish by anything is preposterous. I have often wondered why you and Harold always persist in my going away at the same time, when I can see how much you miss me."

"Old people have their whims. You have lived with them long enough to find that out, dear." Adelina's assurance that her friend would never become old was uttered with a quiet air, but there was, nevertheless, an internal disquietude in the young girl's mind, for which she could not account.

"I wonder what's up?" she said to herself. "Why is it I am asked, even urged, to be away the early part of each summer?" In some unaccountable way she connected this with the reason of her exclusion from one part of the house, though repeatedly assuring herself that such a conclusion was irrelevant. Despite her manifold efforts to the contrary, this thought was continually recurring to her. Mary's repeated asseverations that she was only suffering from lassitude did not deceive Adelina, for if she experienced such a sensation her friends had never known her to admit it before. Adelina was grieved to witness the agitation which marred the usual serenity of Mary's countenance.

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"Ada, dear, play something restful." Adelina immediately conceded to her request, and selected from her large repertoire the compositions most liable to drive away unwelcome thoughts.

"How well you play," said her auditor. "How do you manage to make those fingers perform their office so well?"

"Look at your own, and behold the answer," laughingly replied Adelina. Miss Tracy blushed with pleasure, she, too, had performed on the piano wonderfully well.

The life of this young girl forcibly recalled to her her own youth; perhaps that is why the years bring to the older members of the great drama of Life a desire of renewing through others the part as already enacted by them. Harold, at this juncture, appeared on the scene, the sound of music, as his sister often told him, seeming to reach him no matter where he chanced to be. In this instance other thoughts claimed his attention.

"Adelina," he began, "would you not like to go to some livelier place?"

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"Why, Harold, I've just been away."

"Your *just* means a year, nevertheless," he mischievously retorted, "however flattered we may be by your implying that the time was short."

This was the time annually appointed for her departure.

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CHAPTER II.

SHE DEMANDS AN EXPLANATION.

It all happened so naturally, with such an evident desire for her happiness and comfort that each time Adelina felt the inability to frustrate the plans of Harold and Mary. How her friends could feel that her pleasure was so much involved was more than she could determine.

"Why should I, who am always well, need change, when you two never go away?" Adelina asked, then added, without leaving time for an answer, "it is not quiet for me now."

"It is strange how lively one curate can make a place. He is really the only addition to the place that I can think of," rejoined Mr. Tracy, half satirically. It will be readily seen that he had the man's universal love of teasing. Though the remark was made in fun, the girl betrayed confusion, at which Harold wondered. Could it be possible that she had in so short a time begun to take an interest in this stranger, or was there some latent thought of that other, whose love for her had ended so disastrously for himself? Aloud, Harold said, "There's no accounting for the love affairs of a young girl," which sententious remark really expressed his inmost thoughts. Miss Fiske had regained her equanimity ere long, and showed it by her readiness to indulge in repartee.

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"Harold," she said, "you get worse every year."

"In what way am I deteriorating? Ah, 'tis looks you doubtless mean," he ruminatingly replied. "Not only every year, but every day I see my natural head-gear vanishing." This was said as though he was sorely wounded, with the pretense of ruefully feeling with caution the head which proclaimed to all that the extreme paucity of hair was no exaggeration on his part.

"That does not indicate a falling away of your lingual powers, however," saucily replied Adelina.

"Fie, every one knows my scarcity of words."

"Oh, yes, doubtless; when seen as I chanced to view you an hour ago. You were quietly sleeping over a musty psychology. Yes, I admit you were quiet then. Were you illustrating the chapter on sleep?"

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"Mary, Mary, can you stand by and hear me thus maligned?"

"Mary knows better than to take up for you. Already you presume too much on your past right of guardianship. Even a few moments ago you were trying to dispose of me by sending me to the farthest corners of the earth." As "the farthest corners of the earth" meant only a score of miles, the good-natured controversy ended in laughter. A cloud had come over the face of Miss Tracy at the last words of Adelina. The latter, on reviewing her words, could only attribute it to the mention of her departure. If the truth were known, Miss Tracy had been reminded of something which had taken place prior to the above conversation. Adelina knew nothing of this, except in so far as it related to the effect as displayed on her friend's countenance when she had surprised her by her sudden entrance to the room. Mary had evidently expected a quiet retreat, and so was unprepared to greet Adelina in an impassive manner. Adelina had felt hurt that she was not instantly taken into Mary's confidence. It was so seldom that Mary showed any disposition towards concealment with her. Adelina's thoughts were, however, interrupted as far as this was concerned; for Harold and Mary were again discussing the contemplated trip, and she did not wish to appear ungrateful to them for planning what she inwardly objected to most decidedly. The little frown that followed augured ill for the success of their project, nevertheless. There was no need, she said, of her going away every May and June. The mere fact that this took place at stated times each year was monotonous, to say the least. If a change was necessary, she felt that a change of time alone would be effectual in procuring good results. It would break the monotony, if nothing more. This looked like sheer obstinacy.

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"See what humoring her has done," said Mr. Tracy, with a smile, that did not conceal the underlying gravity. The gravity Adelina thought was only the result of her alleged objection to the carrying out of his purposes. Though she felt half reluctant to persevere in her own interests, she said to herself that she would not be treated like a baby, and disposed of in this summary manner. Aloud she said, "If you wish to dispose of me, say so; it certainly looks as though you wished to get rid of me." Then, ashamed of her petulant utterance, she hastened to add, "It does seem that I might be permitted to know what concerns myself. What takes place in my absence is no concern of mine, but to know why that absence is necessary seems a most natural desire."

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The reference to the taking place of something in her absence was not premeditated; in fact, Adelina had not considered the significance of her words. That the others had was obvious, as was revealed by the questioning looks exchanged between brother and sister, interpreted as wishing to know whether or not the other deemed a disclosure to be plausible. Adelina looked from one to the other in amazement. Had she prepared her words she would not have pronounced any more calculated to produce consternation. So there was some reason for her being sent away at a particular time; opposition would not have produced such an effect as this. She was undecided as to her procedure. She well knew that there is victory in the manner of accepting defeat. If she gracefully retired she would lose all chance of whatever explanation that might be rendered to her, though she was dubious that any would be vouchsafed. In the event of remaining in a quiescent attitude, a revelation might be effected. If she did the latter and found no hope of gratification forthcoming, doubtless she would wish she had decided on the other course. "Well," she argued, "I'll apply my knowledge; somewhere I have read or heard that when you are undecided what to do, don't do anything—a most convenient theory, at any rate." Having justified herself in this conclusion, she assumed a carefully-studied air of complete indifference, which maneuver would, she hoped, bring about best results. When she was unoccupied and quiet, too, people generally inquired if she was sick, which is frequently the case where an excessive talker is concerned. The desired issue was forthcoming.

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"Adelina," said Mr. Tracy, "we had no idea that you were concerned about this affair. Had we known that you perceived any alteration in us, we would long ago have decided that it was best to tell you all." Mr. Tracy looked as though he scarcely knew how to proceed. When once he had decided on the right course, however, he pursued it without deviation, without any consideration of personal disinclinations or inconveniences which might possibly accrue. Those who can thus felicitously form certain decisions appertaining to their moral obligations, and having arrived at such decisions, can unswervingly follow the proscribed mode of conduct, should indeed be content.

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"It is only natural, my child," resumed Mr. Tracy, "that you desire to have revealed to you what so nearly concerns you." To a stranger Mr. Tracy's manner might possibly have produced an impression of latent irritation. The noblest natures, when endeavoring to overcome emotion have often, unfortunately, inadequate means of expressing or manifesting the beneficence actually belonging to them. There was no danger of a misunderstanding here; daily intercourse with a man like this would bear evidence of his nobility. After a slight interval devoted to consideration as to his manner of procedure, he said, "Our wish to have you away during May and June was for your own good."

"That I never doubted," replied Adelina, with a grateful look.

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"If you remember, it was three years ago that we first proposed your leaving us. Did you in no way associate it with something happening the same year?"

"Dear Harold, when did anything so momentous take place?" Harold, reflecting on his inability to prepare Adelina, added:

"It was the year poor Ralph Bamford was taken ill. Have you never wondered where he has been since then?" As if to cover her confusion, he quickly added:

"But of course you have; your natural kindness would lead you to conjecture that far. His malady

has never rendered him dangerous to those about him, hence he has remained a portion of each year with us; the rest of the time with a private family. It was through his ravings that we learned the circumstances you know so well—better than any. Since that time we have always had him with us the months when his sickness is at the worst. Once he caught a glimpse of you—the effect can readily be imagined. We have deemed it expedient to send you away to prevent similar attacks." Mr. Tracy had spoken rapidly, as if to eliminate the supposition that his hearer must be equally garrulous. Even though the young girl's feelings had not been involved in sentimentalities, such reminiscences would be painful to any endowed with the capacity of sympathizing. She was really more indifferent regarding her own situation than she was at the knowledge of pain inevitably inflicted on another by herself. The majority of girls would doubtless have preferred to evince no interest in the young man she had formerly subjugated. Far from her was the intention of affecting the anticipated lack of interest in his welfare. Even Harold and Mary would have thought the desire to avert comment justifiable; however, Adelina took the opposing course by continuing to interrogate them.

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"Is he at all improved of late? Poor boy. I shall always feel that I am to blame."

"Nonsense, my dear," returned Harold. "Then nothing but the event of Ralph's recovery will restore your natural buoyancy?" Mary gave an admonitory look, in order to curb this levity, and also lest the reference to a supposititious recovery might raise hopes only to be disappointed. Mr. Tracy had spoken as if only an ordinary sickness had been at issue, as though there was no aberration of the mental functions.

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"Harold, is there anything to warrant us in thinking he will ever be well again?" Adelina's question was not put as calmly as she deceived herself into believing. Harold regretted his impulsive speech, and would feign have recalled it. He cast a beseeching look at his sister to aid in extricating him from the difficulties attending his folly.

"Adelina," he said, after giving to his sister a most reproachful look for not entering the breach, "there can as yet be no certainty of Ralph's recovery. We often hope where there is nothing to warrant us in so hoping."

"You do not expect me to leave, now that I know that he is to be here so soon?" the rising inflexion alone conveying the idea of interrogation.

That an answer was expected, however, was made manifest by the girl's undisguised eagerness to learn the purport of the anticipated reply. Mary was the first to respond.

"You are no longer a child, dear, and so must judge for yourself. Would you prefer remaining?"

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"I would," replied Adelina, then feeling how laconic was the answer, added, "I would because there can be no detriment to him. I shall be so careful not to agitate him." This last was said almost pleadingly.

"And not to let him see you," cautioned Harold.

"Would he recognize me now?"

"Yes, doubtless, the mind frequently at such times reverts to the past, and appears momentarily to resume its former activity by similar reminiscences."

"Then it would be much better if he did not know me," said Adelina, with a praiseworthy forgetfulness of self, for it was most obvious that time had not proved efficacious in diminishing what had once been friendship, but which now had developed into a feeling not so readily explained, a feeling which had not matured to the ripeness of love. The boundary line was there, yet so fine as scarce to be detected. Even that may prove to be the salvation of many a person's happiness, a barrier, seemingly of little import, yet serving well those reflectively inclined. To the impulsive, easily led by pity or personal feelings, it would be of less moment, save in prolonging the interval of decision—which fact alone might chance to prove invaluable. Adelina would assuredly have been placed under the former category, though sympathy did frequently prompt the desire of effecting what had only the semblance of working the earliest good. It was not long, however, that indecision troubled her. Added to her desire of performing some good office for Ralph, there was in this case a wish to gratify herself. The former cause would have been sufficient to make Adelina form her opinion about remaining. The ability of doing good, or even the attempt to do so, without ulterior motives—unless the knowledge of well-performed duty be called a motive—was enough to secure Adelina's partisanship in any undertaking of mercy.

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"So I am to stay," cried she, after the discussion had ended to her satisfaction.

"You generally do manage to have your way," smilingly replied Mary.

"There; that is what I have been contending for the past hour," put in Mr. Tracy.

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"Oh, indeed. I thought the argument began by discussing your silence," returned Adelina.

"Do any of you know that it is time for tea?" As this seemed remote from the subject in hand, his young friend exclaimed:

"That is right, change the subject. Here is one of the many you addressed who knows how late it is." She was half-way up the stairs before the others appeared in the hall. Leaning over the banister, she called back, laughingly:

CHAPTER III.

THE ADVENT OF RALPH AND A REJECTED PROPOSAL.

There appeared to be a tacit understanding between the Tracys and Adelina that there should be no further mention of the advent of Ralph Bamford. Adelina knew that he was coming soon; that was all. From her nonchalant manner none could descry her real interest in the affair. Harold and Mary were not deceived, however, by any outward calmness. Too well did they know the young girl not to be cognizant of her deep capacity for feeling, even though there was no reason for emotion other than that of sympathy, that sympathy which would have been rendered to any to whom it was requisite or welcome.

A few days following the conversation last related, Adelina was walking on the lawn, when through the shrubbery she espied a carriage which had stopped just outside the drive. From the carriage a tall man first alighted, and paused to wait for a second person to issue from the interior. The former was soon joined by one who was clearly a much younger man, though even from Adelina's point of view, it could be seen that he was not as agile as his senior. "Ralph," the young girl gasped, then added, "yes, it is he." Suddenly she felt the most unreasoning dread of being discovered, not only by the newcomers, but by anyone, for that matter. It was natural that she should wish her presence to escape Ralph's observation until a more opportune time, fearing the result of such a recognition would be of the greatest detriment to him physically, mentally, she did not even allow herself to think. It was strange how immediate was Adelina's recognition of the young man—not, as was afterwards learned, that he had suffered in looks—but a failure to recognize him at that distance would have been most natural, despite the knowledge of his near arrival. Now that he had come, her first and only impulse was to put as much space as possible between him and herself. She ran until she reached a rustic seat, where she sank breathless, laughing at her absurd timidity—that trait not being a dominant characteristic. Ere long she saw a young man emerging from one of the summer houses. He seemed to be engaged in a fruitless search. When he in turn discovered Adelina, a glad look of triumph followed.

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"I've been looking everywhere for you," he said, quickly finding a place beside her.

"Where did you expect to find me? Under the seats of the summer house, most likely," Adelina retorted.

"I think I've looked everywhere, as I said."

This remark was made with the most open assumption of patience; indeed, so transparent was the effort that Adelina greeted the reply with a merry laugh, in which Mr. Burnett joined, perforce.

"Adelina," he said, "I have wanted an opportunity of seeing you alone."

"There; it's coming," said the girl to herself, resignedly.

"Will you not reconsider your answer of last Friday?" Mr. Burnett continued.

"Don't ask me to reconsider, or even remember all of my thoughtless speeches," remarked Adelina faintly, knowing the rendition of the programme to follow as though the parts had been assigned to each one.

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"You might at least listen," pleaded the young man.

"Listen," she said vehemently, "why, I could not very well help it, as I have not yet lost the sense of hearing."

"Ah, that is sufficient answer; if you loved you could not be frivolous."

"I do love," she said with such simplicity, that it is small wonder if Mr. Burnett felt encouraged and eagerly asked:

"Is that true, Adelina?"

Seeing her mistake, Adelina hastened to add:

"Why, yes; I love Harold and Mary, and——"

"Pshaw! I thought you meant some one."

"Meaning yourself? No doubt the two mentioned would be delighted at being designated nonentities." Then, seeing that the young man was really wounded, she said impatiently:

"Why can't you love some one else?"

The fact that she was inflicting pain unwillingly and helplessly made her half angry with him.

"There are plenty of nice girls—Lucy, Alice——"

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"That will do," Mr. Burnett interrupted with dignity. "Love is not made to order."

"Not even when I order it?" Adelina said, with a bewitching air. Then, suddenly discovering her advantage, added, "If you really care for me you would do as I wish."

But for the timely arrival of a servant on the scene, bearing a message for Miss Fiske, there is no determining when the above conversation would have ended. One of the disputants was longing to put an end to it as speedily as possible, or at least, as quickly as was consistent with even a show of politeness; the other was putting forth every effort to prolong it without impunity. To risk all would be to lose all. He was not certain that there was anything to lose, that anything had ever been gained. For all the benefit accruing to either from the conversation it might as well have never taken place. As they leisurely strolled towards the house, both remained silent, neither desiring to break the silence, whether from feelings of constraint or from varied emotions, it would be difficult to learn. While Adelina's thoughts were, perhaps, less sad than those of her admirer, they were at least, far from enviable, commingled as they were with this recent event, and the one of former years. Doubtless she was thinking partly of what Mr. Burnett was thinking of her, and what she would say to that other whose arrival she had just witnessed. Tom Burnett had evidently concluded that "the better part of valor is discretion," for there was no pursuance of the talk, even when he found they were nearing the doorway. Only a quiet "good-by" from him. That was all he said to the girl who knew she had his happiness in her keeping, but whom he never once blamed, knowing with her conscience was all, and that she would follow its dictates, meriting thus always the love he had chosen to bestow upon her. Chosen? No; surely, that word is misapplied, for who ever chooses to love? Does love not rather come unawares to the non-suspecting? and does not the word rightly interpreted tell of an utter forgetfulness of self, implying only disinterested feelings; precluding entirely the idea of selection, which alone would mean something premeditated?

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CHAPTER IV.

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THE MEETING.

Adelina found Mary awaiting her, and, though, secretly delighting in the interruption, learned that there was really no reason for her being summoned, except Mary's wish to discuss recent events, and the desire to hasten a meeting between the two young people. The young girl read the question Mary longed to ask, and answered it accordingly, "I have seen him."

"He is much better than we ever dared to expect. He seems never to have been troubled by the strange malady we know has existed, save for one illusion. Twice he has spoken of his indebtedness to us for the care of his brother. It is clearly a case of mistaken identity. Ralph thinks the man, for whom we have cared, was his brother. As I said, his loss of such consciousness, is all that remains of his former trouble. Perhaps he did have a brother," Mary ended thoughtfully.

"Yes," replied Adelina, "he has mentioned a brother, though I have often wondered why he never told me more concerning him."

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"The gentleman who accompanied Ralph is his physician, Dr. Ellis. He said that Ralph was so anxious to come, and that he was so imprudent he needed some one to watch him."

"Did Dr. Ellis use the word 'watch' before Ralph?" asked Adelina indignantly.

"Yes, but only to convey physical deficiency."

"And where is Ralph now?" asked Adelina.

"With Harold, in the library. Let us go there now. Dr. Ellis left on the plea of other engagements, but partly, I think, to leave us alone with Ralph this first evening. Aside from professional feelings, he seems to take the greatest interest in Ralph."

By this time the speakers had reached the library door, where Mary paused as if to give her young friend a moment for preparation. Adelina, however, desired to make a speedy entrance, which would admit of no time for deliberation. She felt that if she had time to consider the prospective meeting, a feeling of constraint would follow. The most carefully prepared language remains unuttered when one is brought face to face with the contingency. Memory fails, leaving only a trace of forgotten eloquence, which is sufficient to render us speechless, knowing as we do, that aught said now, must ever be inferior to the expressions formulated in quieter moments. Adelina straightway entered the room. Ralph turned quickly, as though in recognition of her step. He came eagerly forward and took the proffered hand, looking searchingly into the girl's eyes. What he read there was not the indifference he had contemplated, prior to his arrival at Deanmouth. A faint flush suffused Adelina's cheek, and, as if to conceal her emotion, she uttered some polite triviality, which, it is safe to say, was not remembered by her. Harold left them, ostensibly on some forgotten errand.

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Adelina looked after his retreating form longingly, but remembered that Mary had not forsaken her. To her surprise, she found, on glancing around, that Mary had not even entered with her. Ralph Bamford had differing views as to the desirability of additional company, as was testified by his readiness to enter into conversation, while inwardly blessing Harold for his considerate departure.

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"It is such a pleasure to be here," he said. "How I have longed to see you." Then, afraid of his own

audacity, emended the last sentence by saying: "Yes, I have often thought of the old place and its occupants."

"It seems to me that we might have been mentioned first, besides it is not long since you saw the place."

"Only a matter of three years. There is, I believe, one accepted mode for the computation of time, which is universally utilized by the enlightened, however we may disagree in the lapse of it. To me three years is no short time."

"What can you mean? You were——" Adelina broke off, horrified at her want of thought; for had she not promised to be all carefulness?

Already she found herself endeavoring to recall to Ralph his other sojourns at the same place under such inauspicious circumstances. She could not proceed with the self-interrupted sentence, even though she was aware that the pause was noticed by Ralph; yet, surely, it was but natural that Adelina should remind him of his former visits to the place. He had seemed so like his old self that she was certain he would remember the visit of only a year ago. She scarce knew what to answer, when Ralph said with a most surprised look:

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"What is the matter? Have I returned sooner than you expected?"

There was reproach as well as surprise in the query. Adelina was pained by the lapse of memory, supposedly inconsistent with the soundness of mind she had commenced to think had been restored to him. Of course the young man attributed her silence to indifference, which state she was far from feeling. The situation was certainly a strange one. There was the lover hanging on the anticipated reply, and longing for a denial of his hasty words; the woman fearing to utter some word which would either wound him, or intensify the mental failure of which the young man himself was totally oblivious. As soon as Adelina perceived her error, she tried to retrieve it by diverting Ralph's attention, refraining carefully from setting him aright concerning his mistaken asseveration; but the young man was not to be diverted by other channels of thought from the question at issue. Having noted Adelina's confusion, he had asked for the cause, and finding one question unanswered, had supplemented it by another. He was growing impatient. Why did Adelina act so unlike herself? Surely, there was nothing to conceal. It was not as though he was a stranger; though, to his amazement, he found he was being treated as such; why, he had known her capable of giving the most evasive replies in the sweetest manner to the most direct interrogations, and never had she appeared so ill at ease to him. Did two persons ever more thoroughly misunderstand each other, or so fail in penetrating the other's thoughts? There could not even be a reconciliation when no wrong had been committed; there was only the breach which neither could cross. Only a feeling of misery, blank and hopeless remained, which it seemed time only could assuage.

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Adelina felt as strongly as Ralph her utter inability to talk; the mere fact that she was so thoroughly misunderstood widened the breach. If she could only have explained to Ralph the cause of her hesitation,—but no, she knew she never could.

Even if Ralph was ever his true self again, Adelina knew that even to spare herself she would never hurt him by such an explanation, an explanation entailing a revelation of the symptoms and various stages of his disease. If it necessitated such indelicacy, she felt that she would prefer being misjudged. This was only theory. She had not been put to the test. How can we answer for what we shall do in a given instance? Adelina was the first to rally, and was beginning to speak, when the door-knob was imperatively rattled by something intent upon letting its wants be known.

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"It must be Watch," said Adelina, after she had discovered whence the sound issued.

"An intelligent dog," answered Ralph, "and certainly very active for his years. I am ashamed to say I had almost forgotten his existence."

"You wouldn't if you stayed long," said Adelina, as she hastened to the door. Accustomed as she was to the rather rough canine greetings, she concealed herself behind the door without looking at the supposed dog as she opened a way for his entrance. A small voice said, "I want to tome in."

"That much is evident," laughingly put in Ralph, as Adelina emerged from her hiding place.

[39]

"Is that you, Pet?" she asked. "Come and speak to Mr. Bamford."

"Is oo mawwied to him?" asked the child, innocently.

"If we only were," said Ralph to himself, perhaps not intended to be in so low a tone as not to reach the desired quarter.

"Do oo weally want to be?" questioned the child, of Ralph, who had drawn her onto his knee.

"Did you come alone?" was the irrelevant answer.

"'Es; I'se not afwaid. I tan thee my houth fwom here."

"Our rector, Mr. Bayne, is her father," explained Adelina. "We are the greatest of friends," she added.

"Who? You and Mr. Bayne?" asked Ralph.

"No, the child, of course."

Pet, not caring to be excluded from the conversation, and feeling a monopoly unfair, persisted in obtaining a solution to the subject uppermost in her baby mind.

"Won't oo tell Pet?" she said. "Do oo want to det mawwied?"

[40]

Receiving still no reply, and in no wise diverted from her curiosity, she continued to enlarge on the subject.

"Papa'll mawwy oo. I'll wun ast him now. Pet fordets," she said, slipping off Ralph's knee ere he was aware of her intention.

"Oh, stop her," cried Adelina, with energy, but so horrified that she could do nothing herself to intercept the childish form. Ralph hurried to the door just in time, and caught the child in his arms.

She looked disappointed.

"Pet fordets," she reiterated.

"You will never get me to believe that," laughed Ralph, remembering her former perseverance. Seeing that Pet did not understand, he kissed her and said he wanted her to stay with him. Adelina had retired to the farthest corner of the room. At first, she was half angry with the child; but later, amusement was the predominating sensation. Presently Pet's voice was heard asking where Ada was, so the latter stepped forward. Ralph's eyes were dancing mischievously.

"You do not mind the baby's prattle, surely?" said he, lest Adelina would deem his ill-concealed merriment untimely and unprecedented.

[41]

The child had brought a change of atmosphere. The two older persons seemed to breathe a different air. Adelina had been troubled at Pet's extreme candor; though, meanwhile admiring the parents who so early had instilled that virtue. Pet had looked with wide-eyed wonder at the two who could wish her to keep anything from her father.

"I always tell papa evwything," she urged.

"But this is not about yourself, dear," said Adelina, trying to put it so the little one would understand.

"But I thaw it," was the answer.

"Saw it?" said Adelina; then added severely, "you saw nothing."

"I did thee he wanted to mawwy oo," sobbed the child, "'tause he looked happy."

Adelina found herself floundering in a sea of difficulties, so for answer, only kissed the child; and, to put an end decisively to further argument, said:

[42]

"Pet, dear, let us see if Ralph has goodies in his pocket."

The little one understood. Whatever wrong she had committed was forgiven. She glanced at Ralph, for it never occurred to her that Adelina's suggestion might prove fallacious. Her implicit confidence in another's word gave evidence of the training received; that the child was not accustomed to being deceived in trifles was obvious. When it was found that Ralph could produce the desired sweetmeats, Adelina asked, teasingly:

"Have you never overcome your boyish weakness?"

"Fortunately for you I have not. Your veracity was at stake. It would have served you right if I had refused to resign the desired articles, after your putting an abrupt terminus to an absorbing topic, ingeniously introduced."

Such audacity in referring to the subject Adelina fondly thought she had brought to an ignominious end quite took away her breath.

"Yes," pursued Ralph reflectively, "that child is a genius; added to that is the perseverance requisite to complete success."

[43]

"Those two are incorrigible," murmured Adelina.

"No, we're not," objected the irrepressible Pet, "we're in chair. Tan't oo thee uth?" She had all of the child's impatience of incorrect statements.

Ralph shook with laughter at this naive utterance.

"I'm doin' home," said Pet, waiting, however, with the expectation of an invitation to remain.

As her elders vouchsafed no reply, she repeated the information, and slid off Ralph's knee.

Ralph who felt that he had probably gone far enough, simply expressed a desire to have her return very soon.

"I will tome," she promptly answered. Then, waiting to be kissed by both, she ran off, calling back sweetly:

CHAPTER V.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS ARISE.

That night was a restless night for Adelina. There were mysteries she could not unravel. She could not reconcile Ralph's lapse of memory with the perfect self-poise subsequently evinced. She knew that a single instance of forgetfulness would not have been perceived by her with such readiness had it not been for antecedent knowledge of mental derangement. Memory had not proved treacherous regarding any other fact, however trivial, which had been mentioned in his hearing. There was another thing which troubled Adelina—Ralph's assumption that Harold and Mary were the benefactors, not of himself, but of the brother whom neither had seen. She had not wanted to talk the matter over again with her friends. It would only accentuate the sad feelings of each. She wanted time (of which commodity she soon had a sufficiency) to think it all over in the solitude of her own room. Once there, she found it equally as difficult to arrive at any just estimate of the truth. She dreamed that Ralph appeared with his brother, and commanded her sternly to choose between them. [45]

She awoke with a shudder to find the sun shining brightly in her window, as if to beseech her to come out and enjoy his glories. She quickly responded to the manifest entreaty, only too thankful to discover that the long night—a night of troubled thought and dreams, was over. When at intervals of consciousness, she had tried to concentrate her vagrant thoughts to some purpose, she could only vaguely feel that there was something she was incapable of adverting; and so, when morning came at last, she was determined to accept such diversion as was offered.

Accordingly, arrayed in one of her most becoming gowns, she descended the stairs, and walked out on the veranda. It was characteristic of her, that when she was inwardly troubled she invariably took the greatest care in making her toilet, perhaps feeling that her spirits might ultimately assume the nature of her garb.

Adelina was soon joined by Ralph, who looked radiantly happy. He evidently thought that her propinquity was enough for the present, let the future bring what it might. He had so long been denied a sight of her, that it is to be doubted whether he even gave that future a thought. His buoyancy could not be otherwise than infectious; added to that were Adelina's strenuous efforts to shake off the unwelcome thoughts of the preceding night, to which she knew that she would succumb if left to herself—without the incentive of trying to appear cheerful before others. Those imbued with such altruism have some recompense even in this world, where reward so seldom seems to come for right doing—that of submerging their own woes in the happiness or reverses of others. [46]

It was later in the morning that Adelina had further cause for sorrow. She had gone to her room for a volume of poems in order to find a quotation which Ralph had laughingly insisted she had misquoted. Adelina, in turn, asserted that he would regret that she had gone only to prove him wrong. Sad he certainly did look when she returned.

He was holding a bit of paper in his hand, as if deliberating whether he ought to continue its perusal or not. He was standing where she left him, but how different were his expression and manner. When she turned to him with a look of inquiry, his only answer was: [47]

"I had not thought you could deceive me."

Deceive him? When had she ever deceived him? She knew she had never done that, even before she had begun to care for him, and now that she was beginning to care, surely it was cruel to accuse her thus.

He mistook her silence for confirmation of her guilt, for was it not her own handwriting which he held? And could you censure him for believing his senses?

Adelina was secretly blaming him for this lack of faith, which was only natural as she was the one doubted, and consequently, knew her own innocence. She could not prove the falsity of her alleged imperfection, until she heard the charges against her, and her pride kept her silent for a time. She disdained the idea of asking the question which would tell her all. How beautiful she looked. Even Ralph was thinking of her beauty, her proud, refined face appealing as it did to his sense of the esthetic. How he hated himself for worshipping the external beauty until he could penetrate beneath the surface and see if she were really worthy of being revered. Ralph viciously crumpled the unoffending paper in his hand. Had it not been the cause of sudden, maddening pain to him? Adelina's absence had, at most, been only a question of a few minutes. Her bewildered look, on her return, ought to have been sufficient to reassure Ralph, and that probably was the reason that he eventually held the fragment of paper towards her. Adelina took it, and with a blanching face, read an excerpt from her journal. It had probably blown from the open window of her room. She remembered that she had carelessly left her writing on a desk quite near the window. The writing was to the purport that she loved some one whose mind was affected, but the bare statement was unaccompanied by any appellation which might lead to its elucidation. [48]

Adelina's first thought was: "Does he know he has been in that state?" But, of course, he must, or

he would not have applied the sentence to himself. She could see that such a circumstance would wound him intensely, for she now believed he was aware of his deficiency.

She felt so regretful of her own carelessness, that she seemed to overlook the fact that he had accused her most wrongfully, and was desirous of making such reparation as lay in her power. [49]

"Ada, you might at least have told me there was another."

"Another what?" she returned with astonishment.

It was Ralph's turn to betray excessive surprise.

"If you loved some one else you could have told me. That, surely, was due me."

"To whom do you think my unfortunate words apply?"

It suddenly occurred to her that it might be possible for Ralph to assume that a third person was involved. She was glad that Ralph should be in ignorance of his real condition, for she now began to think he was; yet she certainly could not do herself the injustice of letting Ralph think she had voluntarily deceived him to the extent of permitting him to believe there was another in whom she was interested.

The previous evening Adelina had acknowledged to Ralph, in response to his eager inquiry, the fallacy of what she was pleased to term his absurd beliefs in her power to attract others—not that he believed it, but he *had* been led to believe that she did not love any one else. It began to dawn on Adelina that Ralph might not have applied the words to himself at all. Here was a dilemma. She could not let Ralph impute such a deception to her. A thought flashed across her mind—why not let Dr. Ellis impart the whole sad story to Ralph? She felt that it was cowardly in her, and yet she realized her own impotence to assume the task. A more potent cause towards disinclination for the undertaking was her complete ignorance of the effect of such a disclosure to Ralph. Poor, bewildered fellow. It seemed to him that everyone had changed. Adelina's eyes filled with tears. She averted her face, not too soon, however, for Ralph to note their existence. [50]

"Forgive me," he said brokenly and humbly; "but this means so much to me."

"Here is Dr. Ellis now. Ask him to tell you all."

"Dr. Ellis? What can he know of our affairs?"

"Nevertheless, Ralph, do as I say. If he refuses to tell you, then I must also. I leave you with him." [51]

Giving a few hasty words of explanation to the doctor, she hastened away. [52]

CHAPTER VI.

A STARTLING REVELATION.

Adelina hurried away in order to disclose to Harold and Mary the decision she had made; namely, the wisdom of no longer concealing from Ralph his previous condition. On first thoughts, this seemed most unwise; and yet, assuredly, it would be far less cruel than to let Ralph continue in the belief that there existed in the woman he loved that which would lead him to an entire loss of confidence. Adelina knew that if she persisted in claiming the matter inexplicable, it would only throw a deeper shadow on the affair, and she could not make the pretense that Ralph had no right to question her.

"Adelina," said Harold, "this appears the right thing, in fact, the only thing to be done. I think uncertainty is one of the worst ills that falls to the lot of mortals. Now there will be at least something tangible. I am sure poor Ralph has found something wanting in all of us. The hardest part was in deciding what should be done. And now, that you have decided, do not trouble yourself with the outcome." [53]

A useless caution, for he was not destined to profit by it himself.

"But, was I right in shifting the responsibility on Dr. Ellis?"

"Certainly; none but a physician would be capable of understanding the effect on Ralph's constitution. Ellis has also made psychology a life-long study."

"How did you discover that? Through your natural curiosity, of course," returned Adelina, with a feeble attempt to smile.

It could readily be seen that no matter how much the three conversed, thus trying to divert the other's thoughts, each was thinking of the conversation transpiring not far from them.

"I cannot think Ralph will be the worse for this knowledge," said Mary, unconsciously ignoring the fact that Harold and Adelina had opened the way for a change of topic, by reverting to the subject which more closely concerned them than a biography of Dr. Ellis, worthy man that he was. They little knew how much he was gleaning from the interview with Ralph, and how such knowledge would affect all of them; how Ralph had information which they were longing to hear, but which he presumed was already known to them. A stranger may often bring new light upon a subject, coming as he does without the tacit understanding of past occurrences which exists [54]

among those closely related, or thrown continually into each other's society. In this case, it would probably not have devolved upon the newcomer to penetrate the truth, had it not been that Adelina was anxious to have the matter settled in some way; for the suspense accompanying her utter ignorance of the reason of Ralph's strange conduct was telling even upon her strong constitution, when she might have withstood the ravages of physical pain alone. If she was miserable, there was certainly cause for the same emotion in Ralph. He knew of nothing to explain, while Adelina was deterred from rendering any explanation solely on his account. The explanation was simple enough, though most unusual. Much anxiety would have been spared the whole household, had anyone thought of investigating; but who dreams of asking for information supposedly already possessed? Soon the doctor entered, pausing on the threshold before he advanced into the room, to say meekly:

[55]

"What is the countersign? May I enter without it?"

This was said with an assumption of profound timidity at the stillness which reigned supreme, and which he affected to believe was exacted by the inmates of the room.

"Oh, yes; come in," said Adelina, who was the only one ready to reply.

Youth often takes the initiative, not from egoism, but its environment may have fostered the tendency to fill the hiatus which otherwise might ensue. So much dependence had ever been placed upon Adelina's executive ability, that this, accompanied by her friends' desire to produce her happiness in every conceivable way, and to advance her mentally as well, had produced in the girl most naturally the capability to meet all the demands of society, also contingencies of greater import.

"Where did you leave Ralph?" she continued.

"Oh, he has gone on one of his interminable rambles," was the response. "For the last few months he has contended that long walks were the one thing necessary for physical fatigue. All of my theories have been set at naught. It was in vain that I reminded him of my superior knowledge. In the end he almost succeeded in making me believe he was right, such is the power of continued effort. Whenever he found he was regaining strength, he would undo all of my work, remonstrate as I would."

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Something had surely happened since Adelina left the two friends.

Dr. Ellis now bore a most radiant look, which was not easy to reconcile with the interview she knew had taken place.

"Now, at least," resumed Dr. Ellis, "I am enabled to understand things which baffled even my acumen."

Of course, he ended by making all laugh, which they felt quite ready to do, for there was something in the doctor's manner which invited mirth. Each one knew that had there not been an alleviating solution of the trouble, the informant would not have been able to throw off the despondency which was fast becoming the possession of all. And now, that something had happened, the reaction was great, and had to be manifested in some manner by the party. Despite the learning of Dr. Ellis, Ralph's case had certainly puzzled him. Before undertaking the case he had been warned of the condition of his prospective patient; otherwise, the doctor would not have been on the outlook for alarming symptoms.

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It chanced, however, that such a warning had been entirely unnecessary, for the alarming symptoms had never come. Ralph's condition, on the whole, had been encouraging, except as Dr. Ellis stated, when there had been weakness resulting from over-exertion, a natural sequence.

Ralph had often alluded to his residence in Australia, and Dr. Ellis knew him to be ingenuous; and, besides, there could be no reason in wishing to prove an alibi. Dr. Ellis had it on the authority of well-known persons that at that identical time his young friend was, unfortunately, at one of the most prominent hospitals of America. In attributing similar statements of Ralph to mental weakness, the physician experienced a startling sensation. Suppose there had been some mistake. He secretly believed Ralph's mind to be as free from disease as his own; how it had been with Ralph before his acquaintance with him, Dr. Ellis was unprepared to say. The latter, believing himself to be competent to form some estimate of analogous cases, had in response to an urgent appeal from certain hospital officials, taken the affair into his own hands; consequently Dr. Ellis was scarcely to be censured for the conditions which arose. A letter had been sent notifying him that his services would not be requisite; that the late patient had died after a painless illness incompatible with the usual attacks accompanied by superior strength. The letter did not reach Dr. Ellis. He learned that his surmises had been correct; for Ralph had just enlightened him; not only sanctioning his conclusions but revealing to him that which truly gave more pleasure than the veriest mines of knowledge would. Now he knew that the esteem that he had given his young friend because of admirable characteristic traits might be endorsed by respect for his friend's mental ability as well.

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Dr. Ellis felt that it was time to share his newly acquired knowledge with the others who were equally interested in Ralph, so he straightway proceeded to relieve the suspense he knew that they were enduring.

[59]

"I think that Ralph purposely absented himself. I proposed that I should be the one to give an account of our conversation," he said, addressing his anxious auditors. "You, of course, know that

Ralph had a twin brother. I did not, however, learn it until a few moments ago. Well, that brother died six months ago, just the time I was first brought into contact with Ralph. True, the latter mentioned the death of his brother, and occasional depression seemed only natural. I was, however, on the alert to discover any sign of what I had been told was Ralph's malady. Not once did such a sign appear. He told me he had recovered from fever just before his return to America. As you, in your letter had spoken of fever also, Miss Tracy, his information coincided with yours, except in point of time. I first thought that there was a lapse of time of which he was oblivious. This set me to thinking, and while I believed ere long that his mind was unaffected, the differing accounts given me, together with chronological errors, were most bewildering. How could so many believe themselves in the right? Ralph certainly had confidence in himself, and your statements were not to be doubted, Miss Tracy. Then, too, the hospital officials would not have given an incorrect account of his sojourn in their retreat."

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"It must have been annoying, certainly," interposed Mary, with ready sympathy.

"Yes, and to think proper investigation would have spared each one of us so much," returned the doctor, with emotion. "It does not seem that we ought to censure ourselves very much, for we never dreamed of investigating what we were positive was correct. Ralph's brother, Edward, died in the hospital, believed by all to be Ralph himself. I left the city soon, accompanied by the real Ralph. He, little knowing that you had seen so much of Edward, decided to have him buried in the place where he had died. Ralph must have been overcome with sorrow, for, otherwise, he would have written of his loss to you, his friends. He had a short illness almost simultaneously. Though he was able soon to walk rather long distances, for an acknowledged sick person, he really has been far from strong."

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"Ralph was never one to parade his griefs," said Adelina, "probably, he thought he would see us soon, and give the news of his brother."

"Edward, alias Ralph, was never dangerous to those around him. That was why he was never taken to an asylum. There were intervals of perfect sanity," said Mary.

"Ralph's untimely return to America has caused all of this miserable misunderstanding. Unfortunate, too, was the miscarriage of the letter which informed me of Edward's demise. When I discovered Ralph in the hospital, I took him away as quietly as possible, having already that authority. Ralph answered to all descriptions, and the authorities having already written to me, never thought of repeating their information. Probably I was looked on as a personal friend of Ralph. They knew him to be all right as far as mind was concerned. How could they have thought of explaining the affair to two sane people? Ralph was not moved to a different town until he was stronger. He did not resent my care of him, but accompanied me home. Had I noted anything strange, I should have reconciled the strange phenomenon with what I believed was my patient's condition."

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Dr. Ellis here took time to recover himself, and remained looking passively out of the window, until Adelina asked:

"Where, then has Ralph been all of this time? In Australia?"

Now that she had heard all, she seemed unable to take the evidence her aural sense had given her.

"Yes, he has been in Australia until a few months ago. Hereafter, I shall require of every man his brother's name before making his acquaintance."

"How did Ralph take it when you had told him all?" asked Adelina.

"He was disinclined to believe the whole story, of course. After I had succeeded in convincing him of its authenticity, he simply said, 'What a friend you have been.' You can imagine how I felt. To have believed such things of a friend, and to be exalted for it, too, made me very uncomfortable. The dear fellow forgave. I felt it in a single grasp of the hand. Then he left me at break-neck speed, his usual way when he is agitated."

[63]

"But how is it that we never heard from Ralph, at all? I mean the real Ralph."

"Pardon me," said the doctor, looking towards Miss Tracy, "he did write, and, in turn, wondered at the silence in your quarter."

"The letter was not received—if it only had been," said Mary, with a sigh. "After all, the whole trouble comes from the loss of two letters; the one to you, Dr. Ellis, and the one to us."

"The letter was accompanied by a small photograph of Ralph, which would immediately have disclosed to all of you the singular resemblance between the two brothers."

"Well, what made Ralph persist in thanking us for caring for his brother? How did he know that he had ever been in Deanmouth?" asked Mr. Tracy.

"I think that was learned from mutual friends just before his arrival; otherwise, he would have telegraphed the news of his brother's death. At that time he was not aware of your kind attention to Edward."

"I must be very obtuse," said Adelina, "but I seem unable to take it all in. How was it you discovered Edward at all?" she asked, turning to Harold and Mary.

[64]

"Notices appeared in the papers," answered Harold, "to which we paid little attention at first, even though the name was precisely that of Ralph; however, when the notices continued to appear and the friends of the young man palpably declined to come forward, it occurred to us that the matter should be investigated. It was, and behold the result. I wonder now, if in answering the advertisements, we did not do it almost entirely from feelings of sentimentality. We soon thought ourselves justified in pursuing inquiries, and yet, how wrong was the conclusion we drew."

"I think I see the subject of our talk now," interposed the doctor, "surely, some one ought to go and meet him."

His hand approached his face with a futile attempt to hide the smile which would come. Adelina's face was soon mantled with a slight blush; but, nevertheless, she bravely rose and made a motion to act upon the suggestion, knowing that all eyes were upon her, and that the doctor's remark was made more from a desire to note the effect of it than from any expectation that it would be materialized. [65]

"As we are the ones who have unintentionally wronged Ralph, surely, we are the ones to make the reparation to him, poor boy," said Adelina.

The "poor boy" was said as though "poor dear" was what was really meant. That interpretation may only have been from undue exercise of the imaginative faculty—we shall not presume to say. No one would have denied the allegation more firmly or indignantly than Adelina. At any rate, she did not seem to weigh long the question as to which one of the party was the one to make the advances. If the opportunity was fortuitous, it was at least most desirable for herself and Ralph, but we shall come to that later.

It was not easy for the girl to go immediately to Ralph, but the desire to talk with him was the dominant sensation, and lesser ills gave way to personal desire. It would almost have appeared that the suggestion of Dr. Ellis was premeditated, and not wholly disinterested, for ere long Miss Tracy and he were seen going in the opposite direction from the way Adelina had taken. At Harold's instigation, Mary had exchanged letters with Dr. Ellis, but they pertained only to the condition and affairs of Edward Bamford. This scarcely justified the doctor in his sudden interest in his unknown correspondent who was at present a most desirable companion, in his opinion. Had the letters been of a personal character, Mary might unconsciously have made them contain a clue, and probably an interesting one, to her individuality. There was really nothing to inspire special interest, unless a thorough knowledge of orthography and rhetoric would count. It seems they did, or was it something else that had transpired? And they did not talk of Ralph now. Perhaps the reason for that was they had been discussing him for so long. [66]

Nothing was said that a third person could not profitably, or, at least *willingly*, have listened to. If, with the wish to tease Adelina, there had been a covert reason for the doctor's maneuver, let us not censure him too severely. Ralph might really be feeling lonely, left out in the cold, and so forth. Strange, how he could enter into Ralph's feelings, and thus analyse them, was it not? And yet, when we consider that he had made the mind, with its various emotions the study of years, it was not odd. It seems less strange when we consider that he was experiencing feelings similar to those he attributed to his young friend; not that Dr. Ellis had been lonely, strictly speaking, for propinquity to others was certain when they were in the same room with him. There is isolation in the largest crowds; in fact, such environment only intensifies at times our sense of desolation. When one is dying of nostalgia, of little avail is it then, that others about us speak our native tongue. [67]

Well, this strategist was far from dying, but the accomplishment of his designs to converse with Mary alone, certainly gave him a radiant look, which betokened the best of terms between himself and the entire sentient world. Why he was giving a detailed account of certain events in his life to one he had known so short a time, we shall not endeavor to determine. Suffice it to say, that he was doing so, and Mary was listening with keen interest to whatever he might have to say regarding his past life, never questioning why the information was elicited. When but a lad he had been thrown upon his own resources, and, perhaps, this knowledge had begotten in Mary a pity for which she could scarcely give an adequate reason even to herself, had such a reason been demanded of her. A great amount of pity she had always possessed, much more than the average person; and yet, in this instance, the subject of her pity had long passed the time when that pity was really needed, though when is true sympathy ever unwelcome or repulsed? Intuitively we know when it is real. Strange, is it not, that knowing this we still proffer the sympathy which is not genuine, and but a poor substitute for true fellow-feeling, and which we know must be detected as such by him who is the enforced recipient of it? Here the interest was not affected. Mary began to ask herself the cause of her sudden interest in this stranger, but she soon concluded that it must be solely due to his propinquity to Ralph during the latter's illness. Of course it was that. She felt relieved to know the cause, and to know that the excuse was sufficient—but was it? [68]

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH TWO COUPLES TAKE A WALK.

Dr. Ellis proceeded to tell Mary of his boyhood; how he was employed by a bookseller, who, in [69]

return for the lad's services, only continued to withhold the merited compensation.

"I remained with him for two years," he went on to say. "Of course I was fed, and clothed, after a fashion, but I had no other incentive to work with him except fear."

"Why did you not run away?" questioned Mary, with reason.

"I did, but only to suffer the more from each attempt to gain my freedom. I was invariably caught. Banks would hear no petitions, and the curious crowd who witnessed my captures thought little of a runaway lad. As for interfering, why, the thought of coming between father and son never entered their heads. When Banks insisted that he was my father, he was believed, and the word of a child was nothing. Each time I tried to escape I was flogged, not before others, for the man was too sharp for that, and was all kindness when there were spectators. I was threatened with worse ills if I did not obey. I can see Banks yet, and hear his voice, as he said, 'You see, your word is doubted. I can prove that you have apprenticed yourself to me.' Oh, the horror of it!"

[70]

"Was the man usually cruel?"

"No; only when I crossed him or appeared dissatisfied. It was the humiliation of it that troubled me, child that I was. I was constantly watched, and seldom allowed to play with boys of my own age. I believe now that he feared I should discover that he had no power to control my movements."

"And how did you finally obtain your release?"

"Through the death of Banks, though I would have effected my escape sooner or later, I feel sure. Banks died, and his nephew fell heir to all that the former had so carefully hoarded. That same nephew had not cultivated the society of his uncle while living, strange though you may think it. Afterwards I took a position in a drug store; the study of pharmacy doubtless produced in me a desire to use the medicines I had been analyzing."

[71]

Mr. Bayne here strolled past the two who were thus earnestly engaged in converse, and, noticing that they were too much engrossed to observe his proximity, ejaculated, in an undertone, "Well, I declare! Dot *is* beginning young, if her secret had aught to do with this affair. She certainly gave me the impression that her secret was a most important one, but who would have dreamed that she meant this—and she but a baby?" Here sheer astonishment ended the monologue, for ere he had taken many steps another couple appeared, walking toward him. "Now, which did Dot mean?" he began again; then he checked himself, and turned to see if he had erred; but, no, there were the two behind him, just where he had left them, or rather, passed them, as much interested as ever, each with the other. In front he beheld this new couple possessing an equal appreciation of the advantages of communication with a desirable companion. That each did think the other a desirable companion was not to be doubted for a moment. Dot, in the meantime, had not consciously betrayed her secret or broken her word; still, older people may guess at childhood's secrets without trying to elicit confidences, and this child was habituated to the feeling that her father must share her thoughts. Now, the very fact that there was something to conceal, perhaps for the first time in her little life, only tended to give her an air of importance which was in itself a betrayal. Poor Dot had followed her father around until in pity he questioned his diminutive daughter. A few words were all that were necessary to give him an inkling of what had passed.

[72]

"How did oo know, Papa?" This was equivalent to saying that his surmises were correct, but he comforted the innocent informant by telling her that her promise had not been broken, so that she ran off, relieved that Papa should know, and at the same time congratulating herself upon her ability to act as confidante. With an omniscient father, what was she to do?

Mr. Bayne would have passed on with only a cheerful salutation, had not Adelina seen his wistful look, and kindly proposed that she and Ralph should retrace their steps and join him in his homeward walk. Was there ever one who enjoyed human companionship more than he, or, for that matter, the companionship of animals either? He seemed to love all things and wanted to be with them, but it was only his friends who could really appreciate the man. There was a look in his eyes which appealed to one; and why? Not because they asked for pity, but rather that they gave it, even when you knew that he was suffering himself. His wife had died when Pet was two years old, and Mr. Bayne had hidden his grief nobly; yet the tell-tale eyes seemed at times to hold depths of sorrow patiently borne, for would he not see her again, that one who had been to him all love and tenderness? Had not the light in her dying eyes bidden him "Wait?" What is the look which comes to our loved ones' dying eyes? Is it a look of surprise as they are about to enter into a new life? Surely that look comes but once in a life, and that when the earthly life is drawing to its close, to be renewed in the glory of an endless one. How strange it is, that we, who have watched and been at the bedside of those loved ones, can follow no further, can never penetrate that mystery or lift the curtain till we, too, are called to take the same pathway. We turn to find the impress of a smile stamped on the face, giving to it peace, and seeming to tell of contentment and well-earned repose.

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Often Mr. Bayne walked about the Tracy grounds, and he was doing so now, with the palpable hope that he might meet one, at least, of the household. He never thought of intruding, and it did not occur to him that his conversation could be welcomed save by those who were especially interested in him, and who had honored him by their friendship and leniency, as he chose to express it. He had no cause for this overweening modesty. Few in rural districts could be more beloved than he, not that there is not as much individual capacity for loving, but aggregately

there cannot be as much love, owing to the restricted populace. Individually, he was certainly the object of much love and veneration. Wherever he went he appeared to carry peace, without apparent effort. He may have begun by cultivating with persistency the means of giving comfort, but later one felt that whatsoever he gave of comfort was given spontaneously. He loved all; what did it matter if they did not love in return? His mission was to alleviate suffering when possible; if not, then to impart such truths as would enable the sufferer to bear the anguish, mental or physical, as the case might be; not, as before stated, to question whether the love he bestowed so freely was in any measure returned. That was no concern of his. In his own immediate family he was in a measure dependent upon the attention of each member. He had always lived with it. Though it is true that that affection may have been taken naturally, yet he was always grateful for it; the fullest reciprocation followed. When the crucial test came he was willing to surrender all without a murmur. Would the curious onlookers pronounce him heartless in consequence? There had never been, and it is safe to add there never would be, a crowd curious alone as to his welfare, provided he had ever mingled with the crowd. Respect attended him wherever he went, whether it was in the homeliest of cottages or at the most elaborate of functions. The latter he did not have the opportunity or the desire to attend, except at long intervals. Mr. Bayne was not solicitous regarding the extent of the intervals; the longer the space, the better.

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"Were you going to run off without even asking how I was?" queried Adelina, reproachfully.

[76]

"That question was answered the moment I beheld you," responded the rector, with admirable policy.

"What a flatterer you are. Of all people in the world, you are the last who should use deceit."

"Is not what I intimate most true, Mr. Bamford?" asked Mr. Bayne, turning to him for confirmation of his asseveration.

"Most assuredly," returned Ralph, adding mischievously, "Miss Fiske does not appear to think it possible that you may refer to the healthiness her countenance portrays, and not the beauty of it." This remark showed that he and Adelina must be on the best of terms. A few hours previous he would not have ventured such an utterance, nor would he have had even the inclination, after the estrangement resulting from what he was pleased to call Adelina's cruel treatment of him. Afterwards he would have done anything to condone for having had a single derogatory thought of her.

"What in the world have you there?" said Adelina. Could she believe the evidence of her eyes? If so, then Mr. Bayne had taken to the perusal of such books as related to the latest feminine modes of dress. Without impertinence she could ask about them, when her elderly friend was displaying the plates with such openness and disregard of public opinion.

[77]

"Oh, these? They are for Dot. Miss Carey, the mantua-maker, had told her to stop for them, but as I chanced to be passing that way I thought I might act as purveyor with equal safety." This was said in a deprecatory manner, as though he had been caught in some act of which he ought to be ashamed; but until Adelina put the question to him it had never occurred to him that the carrying of such literary matter and accompanying illustrations was not the most natural thing for a minister to be interested in.

"Dot, you see," he continued, in an explanatory way, "cuts out the pictures. Doubtless she will read about them when she is older." This was intended for Adelina's benefit, but she pretended to ignore the fact.

"If she does wait to profit by their suggestions until she is older, her outfit will be a little beyond the times," Adelina could not resist saying.

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"She calls them paper dolls," he further elucidated.

"Well," said Adelina, laughing heartily, as they reached the rectory gate, "tell Dot I'll help keep house for the dolls."

"Wasn't he an old dear?" cried she, ecstatically, watching Mr. Bayne's retreating form.

"Who beside would have thought of carrying such things for a child?"

"I, that is, I would do as much for you," Ralph promptly responded.

"Oh, would you? I have a notion to put you to the test, and see what would come of your fine promises. I suppose I, in turn, should be expected to follow the child's example, simply to save your feelings, after you had so inconvenienced yourself, and betake myself to dolls' housekeeping, too."

"Why not do it in reality—on a larger scale?" retorted Ralph, who had the propensity for turning things to his own advantage. Adelina said nothing. Ralph, feeling that he had possibly scored in his favor, continued to expatiate on the pleasures of housekeeping.

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"I do not think that your experience can quite justify you in giving an opinion on the subject," replied Adelina, congratulating herself on not letting him have everything his own way.

"No; but experience teaches, and how am I to gain it alone? I am very docile, dear, and quite willing to learn of you."

Adelina softened visibly. "Perhaps," she said, thoughtfully, "if you had me to take care of you, you

would be more prudent concerning your health."

"I am sure I would," eagerly. "Even Dr. Ellis says I am not careful enough."

"Why do you say *even* Dr. Ellis? It would be more exact to say Dr. Ellis, together with all rational beings, believes that of you."

"But you see I do not flatter myself that all rational beings do think of me," returned Ralph. "If you think of me, it does not seem to signify whether the rest do or not."

"How ungrateful to the rest of your friends!" she cried, wilfully misunderstanding him.

"You know well enough what I mean, dear. I could live without them, and their opinions." [80]

"What a delicately implied compliment. You could live without me, too, if you only thought so."

"But if I do not think so, it comes to the same thing in the end. We are not happy unless we think we are."

"I don't know whether happiness *is* produced by asking ourselves continually if we have reached that state. It seems to me the less concern we give ourselves regarding our own welfare, the happier we are in reality. I don't instigate improvidence, however. After all, happiness may not be the best for us," she added, virtuously. I wonder if she would have been willing to resign her present contentment.

"Well, surely you would prefer for me to have joy if possible, and you certainly know wherein my happiness consists."

"Oh, Ralph," said Adelina, with a suspicious moisture about the eyes, "can you ever forgive me for the horrid thoughts I had about you?"

"On one condition," he responded. "I only wonder now, dear, how you could have had so much patience with an alleged lunatic."

"Don't, please, Ralph." Seeing that she was really troubled, he hastened to say, "Dearest, it is all right now; you were not at fault." [81]

"I'll never again, as long as I live, judge any one or anything by appearances."

"I, too, have learned a lesson, for was I not misjudging you when you were doing all in your power to save my feelings at the expense of your own?"

It was in the evening when our friends were assembled in the little church of which Mr. Bayne was the rector. Adelina and Ralph were ushered in first, then came Miss Tracy and a stranger, not her brother, as was taken note of by the wondering congregation; in fact, Mr. Tracy had taken a seat in the rear of the church, and had permitted this stranger to monopolize his sister. Such a thing had never been known to occur, in the recollection of the Deanmouth people; but as the service had already commenced, surely that fact ought not to have been taken cognizance of, nor ought the congregation to have been diverted from the lesson Mr. Bayne was proceeding to read. The two were utterly oblivious of the intense interest they were creating. Had Dr. Ellis noticed the movements betokening restlessness, proofs of inattentiveness, he would not for a moment have thought that he, a perfect stranger, was eliciting such interest; and yet it was for that very reason that such was the case. [82]

But soon there was not one in the congregation that was not all attention, hanging upon each word of the minister's with breathless interest, and impatiently awaiting the next. It was an address, not a sermon, and Mr. Bayne had entitled it "The Sea of Misunderstanding." How that struck home to five of his auditors! Yet Mr. Bayne was ignorant of the circumstances which were so vividly recalled to some of his hearers by his words. Strange to say, not one of the friends so much as glanced at any of the others, but each knew what was going on in the minds of the others. Had the minister himself ever misjudged any one? I think not; yet why should he dwell at such length upon this subject, and so judiciously interweave the text from whence had arisen his ideas? That earnest air, that placid face, seemed to bear conviction to those who heard, and it might not be going too far to say that such might have been the case had he been conversing in a foreign tongue. I say "conversing," because it always seemed to his auditors that he was only talking to them just as he would if he had not been occupying the pulpit. That is why his manner and the dulcet tones of his voice had in them alone a certain inexplicable power to produce conviction, even though the purport of the words had been misinterpreted; not that he made use of abstruse statements to display his own acumen, as some speakers obviously do, for he sought only to convey in the simplest manner to others the truths he had already ascertained. His mission was being fulfilled. [83]

All who had attended the service were very quiet on their return home. Perhaps Adelina and Ralph found more to say than any of the others.

Two months later they were on board a steamer bound for Liverpool. They were on the deck, and Adelina had produced a letter from Mary, for about the fifth time. She was reading it to her husband, and both were enjoying its contents as though ignorant of what had already been laughed over and discussed a score of times. Ralph was infinitely amused to find that Adelina was not even looking at what she was supposed to be reading—to tell the truth, she knew from memory all that Mary had written. [84]

"How many times has she mentioned Dr. Ellis?" asked Ralph.

"One, two, three," counted Adelina, "four—oh, do you remember Tom Burnett?" she said, breaking off, and losing count, as her eyes caught the young man's name. That part she had not read to Ralph before.

"Yes, I remember him, but what has Mary said about him? I thought some one else took up her whole attention—and letter."

"Oh, it is only some of her foolishness. Tom is much interested in Lucy Malcolm."

"But that is not all," pursued Ralph, seeing that she was keeping something back.

"You provoking boy." Her looks belied her words. "If you must know, Mary only said he was consoling himself with Lucy."

"And you wanted to keep the knowledge of that conquest from me?" he asked, readily taking in the situation—and her hand.

"No, dear. I'll never keep anything from you now, I fear."

"And you don't regret anything?"

[85]

"You surely don't mean Tom?"

This was said with such intense surprise that Ralph could not refrain from laughing; however, he added, "Are you sure you will never be sorry you married me?"

"Never," Adelina said, vehemently.

And the answer seemed to satisfy him.



Transcriber's Notes: There were a few printer's errors which have been corrected. The original publication did not contain a table of contents. This has been provided for the reader's convenience. The original title page of this book was missing and a mock one has been produced.

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