

TWO CHRISTMASSES;

OR, THE MYSTERY OF THE HAUNTED GARRET.

CHAPTER III.—(CONTINUED.)

I know Hugh Tressilian too well not to feel perfectly safe in his hands. Any other man placed in the like position might ask me, knowing that when I refused him I forfeited Grayacre by the terms of the will. But Hugh Tressilian is a just and honorable gentleman—he would never be capable of such a mean and cowardly act. That he will ever ask me to marry him in earnest is out of the question—he knows I do not care for him as well as I know that he cares for Leslie Creed.

But who investigated the change in my uncle's will? At whose suggestion were those absurd conditions made? Whoever the meddler was, he has overreached himself. Instinctively I turn from Hugh to look at my aunt Wills.

I guessed it was her work before I looked at her—I know it now. Her eyes refuse to meet mine, the hard unnatural colour has spread all over her face. Whether Hugh also accuses her of complicity or not I do not know; I do not think he looks at her, or at any one but me. He seems much more put out by the whole affair than I am—more startled by the extraordinary proviso, more astounded by the position in which it has placed him, less satisfied with my easy solution of the difficulty. But I judge only from the expression of his face. He says nothing—never opens his lips throughout the entire proceedings except to answer my two questions. But his stern face has grown white under all its sunburn, and his voice, in answering those two questions, was more unsteady than my own.

"This will, of course, renders the other null and void," Mr. Winder observes, speaking to my aunt. "There must be a power of administration taken out—Miss Ludlow will have some legal forms to go through; but we are her trustees as before—it can be done quite privately—nobody will think of instituting any inquiries about a thing which does not concern them—nobody need know anything about it except the four people present in this room, unless—and he looks from Hugh to me with a comical smile on his chubby round face—"unless Mr. Tressilian and his cousin refuse to play into each other's hands."

"I am not afraid of that," I say confidently. "Grayacre is my own as much as it ever was—just as much as if you threw that will into the fire."

"Of course—just as much," Mr. Winder agrees, still looking at Hugh.

"Uncle Daniel was so wise and practical always—I cannot think he knew what he was doing when he made such an extraordinary arrangement," I go on, sitting up in my chair, with my hands folded in my lap, composedly regarding the attorney. "I dare say I could upset the whole thing by a plea of undue influence, if I could not prove that the poor old man was not in his right mind when he got you to draw up that document."

"Mr. Tressilian's mind never wandered up to the hour of his death," aunt Wills observes, staring into the fire. "He was as sane as I am when he sent for me to witness his signature to that will."

"But," I go on, calmly ignoring her—I forgive her, for Laurie's sake, for attempting to rob me of my inheritance, but I cannot forget it just in a minute—"I am not going to institute any proceedings of the kind. Mr. Hugh Tressilian and I understand each other—we are both quite satisfied to let things remain as they are. And you will take the necessary steps to validate the will, Mr. Winder, as soon as possible?"

"We shall do so without loss of time." "If I wanted any proof of my uncle's having been in a manner forced to make that unjust and foolish condition," I add, rising from my chair, "it would be in the fact of his remorse for having made it acting so powerfully upon him as to give him strength to rise from his bed—where he had lain helplessly for six months—in order to put it where his poor feeble mind imagined it would never be found."

"It would look as if he regretted having made it," Mr. Winder allows, "if—if he was not wandering a little—"

"But we have just heard that he did not wander at all."

"It certainly looks suspicious," Mr. Curtis remarks, as I wish them good morning and walk out of the room.

I do not see Hugh again until dinner-time; I believe he spends the interval walking about the snowy fields—my fields, which look so strange yet so familiar in their spotless shrouding, spread smoothly on the long slopes, rounding up to the bare black hedges, covering the low walls, lying deep on hay-rick and corn-stack—dazzling white in the cool sunshine—so white that even my white cow Daisy looks dingy as she stands by the barn door, and my ducks and geese quite yellow and dirty as they waddle down the snowy slope to the pond.

The two old Misses Jones dine with us—they have dined at Grayacre on Christmas Day for the last thirty years. Aunt Wills has quite recovered her equanimity, and I feel too much relieved by the turn affairs have taken to harbour any spite against her, even if I could forget that she was Laurie's mother, or ignore the fact that what she did she did for Hugh's sake, probably never supposing the conditions would be disagreeable to me if Hugh cared to make himself agreeable—if he did not there was no harm done.

We dine in the oak parlor at four o'clock, and after dinner we all—that is, the Misses Jones and Hugh Tressilian and myself—go down to the school-house to help Anne Carmichael to pour out tea for all the poor in the village, who have a feast and Christmas-tree. When this is over, we go up to the Rectory and spend the remainder of the evening there.

We amuse ourselves with crackers after tea, before we go into the drawing-room to sing Christmas carols. Hugh takes one from the dish next to him, where it has been lying among the oranges, and offers one end of it to me. I pull it laughing, but the count and motto remain with my cousin. He opens the slip of paper and reads it, then hands it to me.

"Some nonsense!" I laugh, holding it to the light.

"When thou shalt love in the sweet pang of it, remember me."

CHAPTER IV.

The business which has been chiefly instrumental in bringing my cousin to Eng-

land detains him longer than he first supposed it would; and I am glad of it, since he makes Grayacre his headquarters, going backwards and forwards to London whenever he finds it necessary.

The days seem to have passed very quickly since Christmas; it is February now, and for the last two weeks the weather has been like June, the soft warm air filling one with dreams of summer, though the sunny blue haze veils only bare boughs yet and snow-drops are still to be found in the wood. But the robins sing, the thrushes hop about the turrets, the young lambs bleat in the pastures, the air is redolent with opening buds, of freshly turned mould, of moss and the young green tassels of the larches—indeed the whole atmosphere breathes of summer possibilities in a way which is to me as sweet as, if not sweeter than, summer itself.

I go about my farm as usual—yet not quite as usual either, for something in the sweet spring air seems to fill me with untiring vigour and buoyancy, with a gladness such as I do not remember to have felt since Laurie and I used to roam the meadows and climb the hills together. I am up and out of doors at six o'clock in the morning, going about with old Michael Footle the steward, or overlooking the corn-sowing, or the work in the garden. Sometimes after breakfast I walk as far as the moor or the Oak Spinney with Hugh when he is bound on some shooting expedition, or ride with him to the village or the Rectory, or even farther afield. But generally we spend the day independently of each other, meeting only at breakfast and spending the evening together; and by degrees we have both learned to look forward to the evenings so spent as the pleasantest hours of the twenty-four. Not that Hugh and I ever dream of caring more for each other than brother and sister, or perhaps I should say cousins who like each other frankly and honestly with a calm Platonic affection, which though it fills us with no intoxicating delight, yet adds materially to our enjoyment of life and of the sweet spring weather. As for falling in love with each other, Hugh knows that my heart is buried in his brother's grave, and I know that he hears from his cousin Leslie by every mail. What aunt Wills knows or thinks I cannot tell. She sits in her own room very much, with one of the younger maids waiting upon her. Hugh seems as devoted to her as ever. He was always fond and proud of his mother.

The windows at Grayacre stand wide open all day long. In the flower-borders the crocuses are up, purple and white and yellow; there are narcissuses down by the pond, the hedge at the end of the garden is white with blackthorn-blossoms, the long fields grow greener every day, the sweet-briar is in full leaf. I find primroses on the sunny side of the hedgerows and all along the lane. But just now my work takes me to the village principally, or rather to the new cottage hospital at the farther end of the village—the pretty red-brick building which I have built and endowed with my poor mother's money, as she always wished I should. It is finished and furnished, and most of the beds are full, for there has been a good deal of sickness in the neighborhood lately—not sickness of any infectious kind, but a sort of low fever for which Doctor Murray blames the low-lying marshes down by the river and the reedy swamps and "inches."

One day near the end of February I leave the hospital earlier than usual, having promised to meet Hugh at our old trysting place at the foot of the moor fields. It is a summer-like afternoon, with a soft gray mist lying low on the meadows and veiling the further woodland, while a glory of sunshine falls on the nearer slopes and throws my shadow far across the mossy turf, as I stroll deliberately in the direction of the fir wood.

No shade of sentiment flickers about the path that my cousin and I tread together, nor am I conscious of any of that intensity in the atmosphere which is supposed to surround a man and woman when they begin to care for each other. Still I am glad when I see the brown figure coming to meet me, far down in the hollow, with Rover and Dash at his heels. I shall feel lonely when he goes back to Canada; I shall miss the companionship which has made the winter seem so short and put new gladness into the spring.

We meet in the hollow, where the path winds among the flags and rushes, not very far from where the river steals across the gray moor.

"Punctual for once, Mistress Joan," he smiles under his dark moustache. "I did not hope to meet you nearer than the fir wood."

"Dash is carrying a rabbit; I stoop to pat his curly head."

"I said I would come as far as the moor field."

"Somebody came with you as far as the rise?"

"Doctor Nesbitt came with me. He left me to walk across the fields to Cecil."

"How does he manage to have so much time to walk about with you?"

"He very seldom walks with me."

"Seldom!" my cousin repeats, with a savage little flash. "I don't know what you call 'seldom.' It seems to me that he walks with you every day!"

"Do you think it such an extraordinary thing that a young man should care to walk with me?"

"On the contrary, I should think it an extraordinary thing if he did not."

"Then why do you make a row about it?"

"I am not making a row about it. I don't like Nesbitt. He is a puppy and a flirt."

"He knows better than to flirt with me!"—throwing up my head.

"If I thought he did not—"

"Pray do not trouble to take up my cudgels, Mr. Tressilian. I am quite well able to take care of myself."

There is glow for glow on our faces as we stand opposite to each other in the middle of the lush green field.

"Joan, would you quarrel with me for the sake of that young fool?"

"Would you quarrel with me because I allowed him to walk with me for a quarter of a mile?"

"Nothing would make me quarrel with you."

"Nor me with you."

We hold out our hands simultaneously. For a moment we stand there, hand clasped in hand, he looking down, I looking up, the dogs gazing at us surlously, at a loss to comprehend the situation.

"I have been thinking of you all day," my cousin says, his stern face relaxing.

"I thought of you when we came over the rise and saw you plodding through the swamp."

"Was that the first time you thought of me since you wished me good-bye in the porch this morning?"

"It could not have been since I came here to meet you!"

"I believe you have thought of me a hundred times since!"

"Well, and if I did? I do not care for any one else."

"But me?"

"I am not in love."

"And I am."

"I knew it," I laugh, looking at him. "You said so at Christmas, though you have denied it since!"

"I denied that I cared for Leslie Creed."

"And I did not believe you. People always deny that sort of thing."

"Do they?"

"I think so. Nobody has a right to ask—at least only one person has a right to ask such a question."

"You have a right to ask me any question you please, Joan."

"Ob, a cousin's right!"

"I am going to ask you a question now," he says deliberately, as we cross the rise and walk slowly into the solemn depths of the wood—"not on the strength of my cousin's right, but as a lover. Joan, will you marry me?"

At first I think he is only speaking in jest. He knows I will never marry him or any other man, and I believe him to be engaged to Leslie Creed.

"I would not jest on such a serious matter, Hugh."

"Nor would I, Joan."

"You are jesting now."

"I never was more in earnest."

"Why," I say, not yet comprehending the situation, "you know I do not care for you, cousin."

"I think you do care for me, Joan."

"I care for you as a cousin."

"No more than that?"

"Certainly, no more than that."

"Will you marry me, Joan?"

His persistence in the joke annoys me.

"If you say that again, I shall quarrel with you."

"I shall say it till you answer me, 'Yes' or 'No.' You shall not play with me any longer, Joan Ludlow."

"I play with you!" I echo, the smile on my face gradually darkening into a frown.

"What do you mean, Hugh Tressilian?"

"I mean that if you do not care for me you have been playing fast and loose with me all these months."

"I am at a loss to understand you."

"You are at a loss to understand me. You know I love you."

"I do not believe it."

"You do believe it. You know I have loved you since the first day I saw your face."

Looking at him, into the passionate eyes, my heart beats fast.

"Hugh Tressilian, how dare you speak those words to me?"

"Because they are true."

"They are not true. You love Leslie Creed."

"I have never loved any woman but you, and never shall, as long as I draw the breath of life."

In this the end of all our friendly intercourse, of the pleasant Platonic affection on the calm tenor of which I was priding myself a little ago?

"I wish you had kept it to yourself, or gone away!" I exclaim pettishly, turning away my face. He has spoiled all our friendly relations towards each other by these few foolish passionate words.

"I could not keep it to myself; but I can go away if—if you send me away, Joan."

"You have left me no alternative."

"Except to marry me."

"I shall never marry you—you know that."

"Then why, in heaven's name," he exclaims, in a sudden fury of indignation, "did you lead me to think you would?"

"I never led you to think it. You might have heard me say a thousand times that such a thing could never be."

"And yet you let me be with you—you looked at me—you smiled!" Joan Ludlow, did you think that I was made of stone, and not warm flesh and blood? Did you think that a man could live under the same roof with you, see you every day as I have seen you, without falling madly in love with you? For, if you did, you made the greatest mistake you ever made in your life!"

I do not answer him, for the good reason that I do not know what to say. His vehemence frightens me—the idea that he loves me is so novel that it takes away my breath. It makes me happy, in a tumultuous kind of way, to think that this brave, broad-shouldered cousin loves me so much; but it is a happiness that has a good deal of pain in it, a good deal of vague regret. It is so useless—so worse than useless unless—But my thoughts will go no further than that "unless."

"I will make you love me, Joan, if you will only give me the chance."

It seems like the answer to my thought. Could I love him? Fool that I am to ask myself such a question!

"I am sorry all this has happened, cousin Hugh; for, though I am fond of you as a cousin, I could never love you well enough to marry you."

"Then you refuse?"

Something in his look or tone, I know not what, or whether he intends it, brings a sudden thought into my mind.

"Hugh," I exclaim passionately, all the blood in my body rushing back to my heart—"Hugh Tressilian, do you know what you have done?"

"I have asked you to marry me."

"But only in jest—say it was only in jest!" I cry, seizing him by the arm. "Say you were not in earnest, Hugh, for Heaven's sake—say you never meant me to take it seriously, and I shall pray for you all the days of my life!"

"I meant it quite seriously," he reiterates sullenly.

"And do you know," I say, dropping his arm and standing before him—"do you know the consequences to me?"

"I know what you mean."

"And yet you deliberately persist in putting that question to me?"

"I do persist in it."

"You have robbed me of Grayacre!" I say, in a lower tone, staring at him in the

dim green light of the pine wood. "You have asked me to marry you, knowing that I lose Grayacre if I refuse!"

"You have not refused me yet."

"It is not I you want, but Grayacre! You never loved me—you never wanted to marry me—you asked me because you know I should say 'No.'"

"You wrong me, Joan Ludlow."

"You are a liar and a robber!" I cry, beside myself with passion. "You laid your plans deliberately to deprive me of my inheritance—you told me you would never do it, but you have done it!"

"I told you I would never do it, because I would never have asked you unless I thought you cared for me."

"I do not care for you—I hate you! You came here and sat at my hearth and ate of my bread, and now you turn round and rob me! What do you call yourself, Hugh Tressilian?"

"I do not want Grayacre—curse it! I am only fool enough and mad enough to want you!"

"It is a lie!"

"If it is, I am not worthy of you," he says more quietly. "If it is not, Joan Ludlow, you are not worthy of me."

"Oh, no, I am not worthy of you!" I cry passionately. "And yet—and yet—you dared just now to ask me to be your wife!"

"And I ask you again."

"And I—"

"Stop, Joan! I will not take your answer now."

"You shall take it! I know what I am doing. If I refuse you, I lose Grayacre, and I do refuse you. Grayacre is mine now—"

"And you may keep it!"

"But it will be yours in a minute—"

"Wait, Joan? Let there be no question of Grayacre at all. Will you marry me? I ask you for the third time."

"No—no—no!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

An Accomplished Swindler.

Thirty years in the livery business gives a man a varied experience and a knowledge of men as well as horses.

I was standing in the door of my stable one afternoon just at the close of the civil war, when a medium-sized, hunch-backed man walked up and inquired if he could be accommodated with a first-class rig for a few days, saying that he wished to investigate an extensive tract of mineral land in that and the adjoining country in the interest of a large syndicate in the east. I exercised the usual precaution of asking his name, where he was from, and if he could give me references. He readily answered my two first queries, but stated that he was a stranger in the place, but had letters, and produced a half dozen introductory epistles from many gentlemen of national reputation. One was from our congressman, whose hand writing I knew, and another was from the governor of our state. It struck me that his credentials were strongly worded, but my desire to please so good a customer, and one associating with the elite of the land, induced my willing acceptance, and I ordered out the finest double team we had. In fact, it was the only pair in the stable that pleased him, and, as he seemed to have plenty of money and proposed paying an exorbitant price, I saw no reason why Mr. Albaugh should not have the pleasure of riding behind my \$800 bays. As he took the lines preparatory to starting he turned, with the air of a man who has forgotten something, and inquired if I wished a deposit, stating that he might not return before the third day. I replied in the negative, wished him a prosperous trip and bade him good day.

I watched them disappear with a feeling of pride—proud to be the possessor of an outfit pleasing a man of such fastidious tastes, and proud to know that my name was so well known with those occupying seats so high in public life.

The third day came, and the fourth, and still no return of my team. Leaving my business in the care of an employer, I started in pursuit. At the railroad station I received a dispatch from a party inquiring if I had lost a pair of horses; if so to await further particulars. I wired that I had, and demanded information about them. The next train brought the author of the message, who was the exact image of the man who had hired my team, excepting the hunch-back. The man who drove my team away was in this particular very much deformed, while this one was straight of build and differently dressed. This similarity was easily accounted for. The man who hired my horses was his twin brother, and an accident in childhood had occasioned the deformity and affected his mind. At times he imagined himself the possessor of property; and, during these periods of mental aberration would occasion his friends much trouble and anxiety. One of these spells had seized him after leaving my stable, and he concluded to drive to his home in Cincinnati. While en route to that point the horses had taken fright at a moving train and run away. The buggy was dashed to pieces. Albaugh was badly injured and death ensued, as the undertaker's certificate testified. One of the horses was killed and the other so crippled that it had to be killed. This was all told in such an earnest, plausible manner that it carried conviction, and when he begged to know how much money would settle the unfortunate affair, I was more than ever persuaded of the genuineness of the man's story.

I answered that one thousand dollars would not have tempted me to part with them.

"Under the circumstances," said he, "will you take that? I am sorry for you, but could you know what a life that brother has led me, and the money his kleptomania has cost me, your heart would pity me, I know."

And to tell the truth, I did pity him. He had turned from the burial of his brother to pay for his brother's folly, and his crushed spirits showed the anguish of his feelings.

So I took the fellow's hand after receiving the \$1,000, and thanked him for the gentlemanly manner in which he had tried to right his brother's wrong, and we parted.

A few years later, I was attending the fair at Louisville, and admiring the beauty and speed of the fine horses exhibited on the track, when my attention was directed to a splendid pair of bays driven by a colored groom; they looked so like the pair I had lost that I took advantage of the first opportunity to critically examine them, and from certain peculiar marks soon satisfied myself they were the identical pair of horses the oily hunch-back had three years before driven from my stable.

Finding the owner, I inquired of him how

he came to find such beautiful matches, and so like a familiar pair that I once owned.

"I bought them in Cincinnati," said he, "from an importer of blooded stock; this was a picked pair from his importation which he had reserved for his special use; but urgent business recalling him to Europe, and not caring to leave them in hired hands necessitated his selling."

"I bought the pair for \$2,000, and have many times been offered more than double that money, but \$5,000 would not tempt me. They have beauty and speed, and are to-day the fastest double team in the State."

"Could you describe the man from whom you bought them?" I asked.

"Yes," said he, "the man from whom I purchased was medium sized, apparently forty years of age, with hair quite gray—prematurely, I should think—and his general appearance clerical. One would not have taken him for a stockman. He was well informed and one of the most agreeable conversationalists I ever met."

I explained my part in the history of the horse, and how I lost them. He ignored my belief that they were the same horses, but I brought forward such overwhelming evidence in proof of my ownership that he agreed to surrender.

I paid him \$1,000, the amount which I received from the rogue, feeling that he was the more injured of the two, and received back my team, mutually agreeing to spend another thousand, if necessary, in bringing to justice our thief; for we were persuaded that the hunch-back, the twin brother and the clerical-looking person were one and the same individual.

A minute description was given to detectives in the various large cities of our country; police reports were carefully read, but nothing from our man could be discovered. Finally, believing that he had been picked up under some assumed name and imprisoned, I had almost allowed the matter to fade from my mind, when one winter, my health failing me, I heeded the advice of my physician and went to Florida. In St. Augustine I took board at a sort of select hotel, patronized principally by northern families wintering there for health and pleasure, and all of them representatives of wealth. Among the guests at the dinner table my first evening there, was a young lady of rare beauty and engaging manners to whom I was introduced as Miss Effie McKnight, the only daughter of a widow from Baltimore.

Our landlady turned to the daughter and said: "Miss Effie, I have pleasing news for you. Count Van Earl has written, engaging rooms, saying we may expect him in a day or two."

At this announcement the count became the topic of conversation, and I saw in the pleased smile which fitted across Miss Effie's face that the countess's coming interested her particularly; and in the two days preceding his arrival, I noted the eager interest she took in everything pertaining to him.

I have often thought that the pursuit of any coveted object up to the very eve of its possession is the most blissful state of human existence; there is nothing in the possessing of that object that even approaches the dreamy, hopeful, happy longing for the time to come when the cherished idol of our hearts will be ours to hold in contentment.

But this aside, Count Van Earl, I learned, had not only an immense fortune, but was heir prospective to an extensive landed estate in England and Wales. He was an Oxford graduate and had taken an extra course in Edinburgh. His travels had taken in every point of the compass, and he talked like a book about the beauties of Siberian wilds and the splendor of Oriental skies; he had touched the mould and must of ancient tombs, and walked with the Turk among his modern graves; in fact, this titled scion of nobility was so promising an acquisition to our select circle that it was not surprising to see an extra display of silver on the table for the greeting of the count.

I remember well the morning of his arrival. My room opened fronting the hall, and as he ascended the broad stairway in company with his valet, I had a fair view of his face. It was the face of my notorious swindler and thief; a face that once seen could hardly be forgotten, especially when the force of circumstances had photographed it on the memory, as in my case.

New here was a dilemma. This man was society's pet and the affianced husband of a beautiful and aristocratic lady, and I a stranger. But I resolved to act, and act at once. So leaving the house I sought and obtained an interview with a well known detective who carried the seal of authority, and acquainted him of the facts. Together we returned to the house, and walked boldly to the "count's" door. The officer introduced himself by giving his name, but not his business, and said:

"Here is an old acquaintance who desires an interview."

"How do you do, Mr. Albaugh," said he, "glad to see you."

"What do you mean, sir," said he, "coming into a gentleman's room in this rude way? I am Count Van Earl, sir; here is my card."

"And here is mine," I answered. "You remember that team you hired at my stable for a three days' drive. I recovered it three years afterward and now I want you, Capt. Bowen, to take charge of this man;" and the detective obeyed.

The rogue wilted at once and begged to be shielded from exposure. The affair had been so quietly worked that when I went down and asked that dinner be sent to the count's room and explained the reason, it fell like a bomb.

Miss Effie at first spurned the idea of his guilt; but the detective's shrewd questioning secured such a confession as to condemn him even in the mind of his affianced, and she refused to see him again.

That night he was quietly removed, but while in the care of a deputy officer, who was guarding him, he managed to escape, and was never again seen or heard of by me. He was, without doubt, the most accomplished scoundrel on sea or land, and if living to-day is sailing under brilliant colors somewhere.

The music of the Chinese theatre at San Francisco has made the following impression on a local journalist:—"Imagine yourself in a kettle manufactory of four hundred hands, all busily engaged in hammering. Suppose you have on the right a rivet work in full activity and a quartz mill on the left. Add six hundred drunken men in front, supplied with every kind of instrument, and four thousand infuriated cats on the roof. You may then form some faint idea of the performance of a Chinese orchestra."