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BY MRS. ALEXANDER.

* * * *

Mr. Joseph Dargan was busy as usual over his papers and accounts one sultry morning. His dingy den was dingier and more redolent of dust than ever, the blind he had torn in his effort to save Beaton's eyes from the sun had been carelessly nailed up in a slant, and Dargan himself, who was too dry and bloodless to feel changes of weather, was brown, discolored and grubby as usual.

He wore a look of satisfaction, however; a fresh victim had just effected a loan through his "agency," as he termed it, and he had been calculating his immediate and prospective gains. In this agreeable occupation he was roused by the entrance of the grimy boy, who placed a tiny note before his master, and said interrogatively "See her?"

Mr. Dargan shoved his glasses a little nearer his eyes, opened the note, and read, "Can you speak to Mrs. Winington for a few minutes?"

"Oh, Lord!" ejaculated Dargan, in a low tone, hastily folding up the note again. "Ay, let her come in, let her come in."

He started up, pushed away his chair, and was half-way across the room as his visitor entered.

What an apparition in that dull sordid chamber! A very perfect costume of silvery gray satin and grenadine and shining gray beads; a bonnet also gray, with downy soft feathers tipped with silver, resting on her fine wavy auburn hair; gloves and shoes and parasol all delicately matching, lent to and borrowed from the wearer additional beauty. Even old Dargan was impressed, and hesitated how to address this dazzling vision.

With a half surprised, half contemptuous glance, Mrs. Winington took in the details of the shabby room, and recognized the effect she produced on the owner.

"Do you know who I am?" she asked, showing her white teeth with a frank, amused smile.

"I think I do, I think I do, ma'am—my lady, you are my friend Mr. Beaton's sister; let me give you a chair. I feel almost ashamed to let you sit down on such a tattered seat, but times are hard; as to new furniture, I daren't think of it."

"I came to see you, not your furniture, Mr. Dargan," said Mrs. Winington, taking the dilapidated chair. "I want to talk to you about my brother and your ward."

"I am sure, ma'am, I'm all attention," shambling back with his uneven step to his place behind the knee-hole table. "It is a long time since I heard anything of them, and indeed I didn't think your brother was the sort of man to let the grass grow under his feet."

"On the contrary, his precipitancy has nearly ruined all our plans. I say 'our,' Mr. Dargan, for though I have not the pleasure of knowing you, I know all your plans, and the bargain you made with my brother."

"Eh! do you, now?" grinning confusedly, and pressing the nib of a pen on a very black thumb-nail. "Well, I did think that little—a—agreement was to be a secret betwixt Mr. Beaton and myself, of course."

"Of course," interrupted Mrs. Winington, "It was quite right and natural that he should confide the whole affair to me, especially as neither of you could have carried out your schemes without my help. It is equally natural that you should look after your own interests, though strait-laced people might say the means you took to secure them were not exactly creditable."

"Well, you see, what people say doesn't reach my ears," returned Dargan with a deprecatory writhe, rubbing his hands together. "And how is Mr. Beaton getting on, may I be so bold as to ask?"

"He is not getting on at all," cried Mrs. Winington, with a burst. "He is such an impatient creature, and your ward is an obstinate simpleton. He proposed too soon, and she refused him."

"Good Lord! think of that, now. Such a fine, elegant gentleman. I didn't think any young lady would say him nay," and Dargan began nervously to gather up the papers which lay about and sort them in an unconscious way. "And do you mean to say it's a drawn game?"

"I do not intend it shall be," said Mrs. Winington, closing her mouth firmly.

"Then what do you mean to do, my lady—I mean ma'am?" asked Dargan, nibbling the top of his pen and gazing at her with some awe and a good deal of admiration.

"Listen; I have not much time to spend here, and if you intend to get your money you must help me. I suspect that Miss Vivian has rather taken a fancy to a very unsuitable person, whom she unfortunately met at my house—a stern, puritanical countryman of mine, who would not lose an atom of his just rights to save your life. He would be more likely to expose what he considered a fraud, than lend himself to any litt'e arrangement that might facilitate matters. In short, he must not interfere with my brother."

"No, certainly not; that's right."

Mrs. Winington's eyes rested with unspeakable disdain on the withered, grinning, ignoble face opposite to her.

"I'm sure you have only to command me;"

"I have managed to bring Miss Vivian and Mr. Beaton together again, and she is playing at friendship with him. Let him pursue that game for awhile, when you must strike a blow and cut off her retreat. Your sister is her companion?"

"She is."

"And I presume you have a good deal of influence on Mrs.——"

"Miles," put in Dargan. "Yes"—rubbing his hands softly—"I rather think I have."

"Then you must make her give up her engagement with Miss Vivian. Invent something imperative; send her away somewhere, a long way off; let that damp cottage in Hampshire, or sell it; cut off her supports, leave her no stand by but Mr. Beaton. She is perfectly desolate; this ought to make her thank her good genius that she has found such a protector as my brother."

"My sister will no doubt do as I bid her," said Dargan, laying down his pen, and beginning to stroke down his leathery, puckered cheeks with his finger and thumb. "But it seems a little strange to me that you should be so desperate anxious to get my ward for your brother. Grand people like you might have a choice of heiresses, I should think."

"Heiresses fenced round with bristling hedges of uncles well up in the private history of every man in society, and cousins anxious to keep the money in the family, if you like, but not heiresses perfectly free and unencumbered. Do not waste my time and your own in conjecture. Will you follow my suggestion, or shall we break off negotiations, and send your ward back to the wilds from which you dragged her, poor child, for your own ends?"

"I don't pretend to be an angel, Mrs. Winington, no more than Mr. Beaton does, but I thought and still think, I was doing the best I could for Miss Vivian by pushing her marriage. I'm of your opinion that this shilly-shallying ought to be put a stop to; but you are as quick as a flash of lightning, and down on a man before he knows where he is. I think your notion is very good, very good, and you'll see I'll not be long about acting on it. I'll start Mrs. Miles off and give her permanent employment; but I hope, when the knot is tied hard and fast, Mr. Beaton would not object to a little annuity in consideration of the help she is giving him.

"She is helping you, too, Mr. Dargan," said Mrs. Winington, shrewdly, "and I hope you will not prove ungrateful." She rose as she spoke. "We understand each other then," she continued; "our interests are alike. I suppose I may depend on you?"

"I'll be as true as the needle to the pole," cried Dargan, enthusiastically.

Mrs. Winington laughed as she gathered up her delicate skirt lest it should touch the dirty carpet, and with a slight, haughty bend of the head left him.

"Well, she is a clipper. I never saw her match; and isn't she regular fire and tow! I wonder now what's the real reason she's so keen for this wedding? there's something more than anxiety about her brother under it all. I'll say nothing to Tilly about this; time enough, time enough. As to Sally, she daren't refuse me anything and Tilly has no call to interfere with her; duty and family affection must be attended to. Where shall I send her? Liverpool; ay, Liverpool, would do well, very well."

Meantime Mrs. Winington, who had driven to C Street in a cab, and kept it waiting, was proceeding homeward via the Strand, when by one of those curious currents in the stream of life which are no doubt governed by laws as yet undiscovered, despite their apparently accidental nature, she was drifted against the man who occupied her thoughts.

At little past Temple Bar there was a block, and her cab was obliged to stand still for a minute or two beside the foot-way. As she looked listlessly at the passers-by, she suddenly recognized Jack Maitland coming from the direction in which he was going. With a mixture of surprise, vexation, pleasure, but the last strongest, she waved her hand and caught his eye. He came readily enough, and the next instant she was exclaiming, with smiling lips and eyes:

"Back again in London, Mr. Maitland! Then I hope you dear mother is going on favorably."

CHAPTER VIII.

ACCEPTED.

It was always with a sensation of pleasurable excitement that Mrs. Winington met Maitland, but on the present occasion it was by no means unmixed. His coming was most inopportune, his appearance might introduce a discordant element into the scheme she was so diligently harmonizing. But even while she smiled on him the kindest of welcomes, she said in her heart: "He shall not defeat me, nor even delay me."

"Shall you be long in town," she asked, after Maitland had replied to her inquiries.

"Only a day or two. I have no railway business to detain me now."

"We are, unfortunately, going out to dinner to-day, but can you look in and have a cup of tea a little before five?"

"Certainly. I shall be most happy," returned Maitland, his eyes lighting up with the joyous, tender expression she knew so well.

"Do not be late. She kissed her hand to him as he stepped back, and signed to the driver that he might go on.

"He is not handsome," thought Mrs. Winington, "but how much better looking than most handsome men. Oh, no one ever loved me as Jack did, and I treated him abominably. I think he likes me a little still." Then the horrible suspicion flashed across her brain, could the light that came to his eyes have been evoked by the prospect of meeting Edith Vivian? No, impossible! how could that insignificant child attract him from her rich beauty and practiced charm—a charm, too, which had once completely captivated him?

The perfume of those delightful, foolish days must hang round her still. Oh, to hear him say in the deep, full tones that used to stir her blood, if not her heart, "No one can ever be to me what you were!" No, it was not likely that a poor little simpleton could be her rival. Lady Mary was dreaming; yet, "He shall not see her," was her fixed determination as she alighted within a short distance of her own door, and dismissed the conveyance.

"Has Mr. Beaton been here this morning?" asked Mrs. Winington, as she entered her own mansion.

"No, 'm," said the butler.

"Then send to the club, and say I want to speak to him at once; send one of the grooms on horseback. If Mr. Beaton is not at his club, let the man go to his lodgings."

"Very well, 'm."

Mrs. Winington went to her room. At luncheon the master of the house made his appearance, which was not an event of every-day occurrence, and when Mrs. Winington and her brother came in, they found him chatting cheerfully with Edith in the bay-window looking on the gardens.

"By George!" cried Colonel Winington, "Miss Vivian has been making great progress, Jean. I have persuaded her to let me see some of her work. Look here," holding out a drawing of a lattice window, one half open, with ivy and clematis clustering round the side, a vase standing on the window-sill as if in readiness for the flowers that were to fill it. "It's deucedly natural. There's a window in the head-keeper's lodge at Winford just like this. You must come down and see it."

"Yes, that is a very nice little bit," said Mrs. Winington, "and it is from a real window. Mr. Herman has a charming old house; he built his studio beside it."

"It's uncommon pretty," continued Winington. "But come, let us sit down. I am as hungry as if I had breakfasted last month. Beaton, cut that chicken pie. What's the matter with you? I never knew you so silent since I had the pleasure of making your acquaintance. Have you been snubbing him, Miss Vivian?"

Edith blushed quickly and vividly. Mrs. Winington frowned, and could hardly refrain from uttering the "How asinine!" which sprung to her lips.

"They say Parliament is to be dissolved on the fifth of August," she said to her husband, intending to draw him effectually from the subject.

"They say! Who says? Some blundering idiot. There's no such luck. But I am not going to stay on roasting here. We'll go down to Winford; sh'a'n't we, Miss Vivian? and you shall make pictures by the yard. Try a little hock; do, it's iced, and very good."

"No, thank you;" then addressing Mrs. Winington, "I have written to Mrs. Miles and to Mr. Tilly, telling them that the studio would be closed next week, and that you cannot stay much longer in London, therefore, I had better return to Littlemere." She spoke with some hesitation, and looked appealingly to Mrs. Winington.

"Well, dear, I wish you had spoken to me before you wrote. I shall not leave town till the first of August, and though I cannot exactly fix my plans, there is time enough; you need not be in such a hurry to run away from us."

"No, let us all go down to Winford together. You don't want go off on any distant cruise, do you, Jean?" cried Colonel Winington.

"I shall not commit myself," she returned, laughing.

Beaton preserved an expressive silence, his eyes fixed on his plate.

"I do not wish to go, indeed I do not," said Edith, earnestly. "You are all so good to me, but I fear to be in your way, and I do not want to desert my own home."

"And we are of course tired of so tiresome and naughty a little girl," said Mrs. Winington, with a pleasant smile. "However, things will arrange themselves. I was going to propose, as it is such a splendid day, to drive over to Clapham Common in the pony carriage. There are some rather picturesque groups of trees there—one specially on an island in the large mere or pool. It might be good practice to try and sketch them; trees are so difficult. I went there once with your sister, Frank, when she was art crazy."

"Ah, I remember," said Colonel Winington, nodding.

"Unfortunately," his wife went on, "I have had a manifesto from Madame Laure, who is coming to try on my autumn costumes and plan an evening dress or two; and if I lose this chance I may not catch her again, for Laure is a personage. I assure you."

"I am very sorry," cried Edith, impulsively; "it is so difficult to find anything to sketch near London."

"Why lose this brief idea?" said Beaton, looking up. "Can you trust me, Miss Vivian and the ponies to me? I will drive carefully, and cut pencils et cetra with diligence. What do you say?"

"An excellent suggestion," exclaimed Mrs. Winington. "Will you accept it, Edith?"

"Yes; thank you very much. I should be so glad to do a little more sketching."

"You are right, Edith. Then I will order the phaeton to come round at three, and you'll have a nice long afternoon. Ring the bell, Leslie."

"Ha, Beaton, you haven't served your apprenticeship in drawing-room life for nothing," said Colonel Winington significantly.

His wife looked at him with a warning frown, but his insinuation fell harmlessly on Edith's ear; she was feeding Mrs. Winington's favorite Skye with bits of sweet biscuit.

Colonel Winington rose soon after and left the room, saying he had promised to meet a fellow at Tattersall's.

Mrs. Winington soon followed his example and Edith went to put her drawing materials together.

Maitland thought time had never gone so lingeringly as between his meeting with Mrs. Winington and five o'clock, when he was due at Fairfield Terrace. He felt quite sure of meeting Miss Vivian. He knew from a letter of the colonel's, received only a couple of days before, that she was still Mrs. Winington's guest, and likely to remain. Moreover, she never went out without her hostess.

Would she welcome him with the sweet, frank, unconscious gladness he had often read in her eyes, when they had met unexpectedly, or would she have changed during his absence? If not, no weak scruples should hold him back from trying to win her. If she had absolutely refused Beaton, as Colonel Winington seemed certain she had, Mrs. Winington had no right to be opposed to him, and yet he felt with instinctive conviction that she would oppose him bitterly.

"I must steer with caution," he thought as he rang and was admitted into the cool, dusky, perfumed hall.

"This way, sir," said the butler, ushering him up-stairs to the smaller of the two drawing-rooms, where Mrs. Winington sat in softened light amid a profusion of delicious flowers, fresh from a second toilet, after showing herself in her carriage, shopping, and leaving cards. She had hurried home and dressed just in time to be languidly at ease when Maitland was announced.

"Bring the tea; and, Miller, I am not at home." The butler bowed obedience and retired.

"I am quite glad to hear all about your mother and dear Craigrothie from yourself," said Mrs. Winington, when they had exchanged greetings. "Mrs. Maitland was always so good to me when I was 'a motherless bairn' at home. I hope she is gathering strength."

"Very slowly. Yet she does improve, I doubt, however, that she will be able to bear an autumn and winter at Westoun though it is the most sheltered spot on the estate. I shall take her away south somewhere."

"You were always very fond of your mother, Jack," said Mrs. Winington, naturally. "But oh, there is no use in looking back. Can any afterglow the world gives equal the fresh delights of early days? I am half ashamed of the aching at my heart when I think of them."

"I don't fancy, considering your present surroundings, you have very much cause to regret them," said Maitland, smiling.

"You think so?" looking down. "I have most to regret my own folly and weakness," sighing slightly. "But tell me more about your mother," she resumed, as the servant placed tea and wafer-like bread and butter on the table noiselessly and then vanished. "It is years since we met. I suppose her tranquil life has left few traces on her sweet face. She always seemed a kind of saint to me."

"She is a good deal changed, for though her existence has been still enough, Heaven knows, she has had a great deal of anxiety, and little exterior support."

"It must be a great comfort to her having you at home," returned Mrs. Winington, and she continued to speak of their mutual experiences in the past, approaching dexterously the scene of their stormy parting, with the intention both of eliciting some expression of his feelings from Maitland, and of giving her own explanation of the fact that she threw him over for a wealthy suitor.

But her skill was unavailing, unerring instinct told her they were not in sympathy, that she neither touched nor stirred him. An irritating sense of pain and defect began to dull the keenness of her native tact; she could scarce keep her brow smooth, and as she caught Maitland's eyes wandering occasionally with an expectant look to the door by which he supposed every moment Edith would appear, she found it impossible to maintain her tone of dreamy, tender reminiscence. Was he looking for Edith, thinking of that pale-faced chit whom she was metaphorically at his feet? had she lost all chance of reawakening the passion she had herself extinguished?

"Are you not a little distrait, Mr. Maitland?" she asked, with a well-assumed air of playfulness. "Who are you looking for?" Leslie, or Miss Vivian?"

"I rather expected to find Miss Vivian with you," said Maitland, with such unhesitating frankness that Mrs. Winington was a little reassured. "Leslie is out of town, I heard."

"Yes, he was out of town," returned Mrs. Winington slowly, for she was making up her mind to a big bold falsehood. "But he came back nearly a fortnight ago, and I am sure you will be glad to hear that my hopes have been fulfilled. Miss Vivian has made up her mind" ("which she shall," said the fair intriguer to her heart, in self-extenuation), "to marry Leslie. He has driven her over to Clapham to-day, as she wanted to sketch some trees there. I really begin to think Leslie will be very fond of her. I am sure he ought, for she is devoted to him."

Silence. It was a most unexpected blow, and for a moment Maitland was too stunned to think clearly. He rallied himself by an effort. It would not do to make an enemy for Edith of this clever, unscrupulous woman.

"I congratulate you," he said, looking down, while he tapped the carpet softly with his stick. "I hope Beaton will make a kind, steady husband. Miss Vivian seems to me something of a home bird."

"Like other women, she will probably become what her circumstances make her," said Mrs. Winington, shortly. "As the engagement is only just made, I feel you will not speak of it at present to any one."

"Certainly not, if you desire it. I did not fancy affairs would go quite so quickly from what I saw before I left town."

"Oh, they went much quicker after you left. It will be announced next week, and then we shall hurry on the marriage as fast as possible; in fact I shall not leave town till it is an accomplished fact. Then, after such prolonged self-abnegation, I am going to stay with the Johnstones at Strathcadie to refresh myself with a glimpse of the dear old country."

"Indeed! It is a long time since you visited the banks and braes of Craigrothie," returned Maitland, in a somewhat forced voice.

"Yes; quite ages. Shall you be at home in September?"

"I suppose so."

"Then you must be my guide, philosopher and friend in the scenes of our youth," said Mrs. Winington, stealing a watchful glance at his sombre countenance.

"I am at your service, of course."

Mrs. Winington felt the formality of his tone and sighed.

"If you are disengaged to-morrow, come to dinner and meet the affianced ones," pursued Mrs. Winington, boldly; while she told herself, "He will not come."

"I shall be most happy, if I am in London; but should I settle the matter about which I came up, I am bound to return by the night mail." He rose as he spoke.

"We shall hope to see you, however," said Mrs. Winington, smiling sweetly, without making any attempt to delay him.

"For the present, good-bye then. Should I not see you before I go, may I congratulate Beaton for me at the right time."

"He will tell you something. I have no doubt. Remember, 7.45 to-morrow. Good-bye."

Mrs. Winington stood looking after him for a minute, her brows knit, her finger-tips of one hand resting on a small table beside her, the other grasping a locket at her throat.

"He came here to seek her," she murmured; "herself, or her money, Mary says I have dealt him a cruel blow. How gallantly he took it! He must never know I lied to him. Now this marriage must take place; and soon, cost what it may to every one concerned. How his eyes sought that door! Had she come in, they would have told everything in spite of his strength and self-control. Oh, how different he is from the weak wands of men that surround me!"

* * * *

Edith returned from her sketching excursion, looking brighter and better than day on which she had wounded her with the speech she had put into Maitland's mouth.

"If she likes Leslie and marries him willingly I will forgive her," thought Mrs. Winington, as she looked at her sweet eyes and soft color. "She really can look almost pretty."

"Had you a pleasant afternoon, and did Leslie cut your pencils judiciously?" she asked kindly as they went up-stairs; Edith to take off her hat, and her hostess to dress for a dinner-party.

"It was very pleasant indeed. Mr. Beaton was, as he always is, so good. How much he knows, Mrs. Winington! He gave me quite an interesting account of Clapham, and Streatham and Dr. Johnson."

"Did he?" with a little surprise. "Oh, he is not dull."

It was not till the next day when they were breakfasting, however, that Mrs. Winington thought fit to tell Edith of Maitland's visit. She had pondered profoundly on the best method of dealing with this fact, though it was with a natural air of sudden reflection she exclaimed:

"Oh, by the bye, I forgot to tell you I had a visit from Jack Maitland yesterday."

Edith colored a little, but answered calmly, "Indeed! I suppose his mother is much better?"

"Yes; nearly quite well. I don't know how long he is going to stay. I asked him to dinner to-day; both Colonel Winington and Leslie like him."

"Will he come?"

"He will if he does not go north to-night. Why, you don't like him; eh, Edith?"

"I am not so foolish as to dislike him, though I am sorry he is not as wise as I thought he was," and she smiled.

"That he certainly is not. He asked for you, but with a sort of mocking, pitying smile that vexed me. Are you sure, dear child, you never showed him any particular preference?"

"Not that I am aware of; but you know how ignorant and untrained I am, dear Mrs. Winington. And when I am left to myself again I shall probably forget all you have taught me."

"You must not be left alone," said Mrs. Winington, thoughtfully.

And Edith went away to read in her own room, as was her habit; but it was some time before she could fix her mind on her book. The sense of unmerited humiliation, of pain and anger against Maitland, which she had successfully suppressed, was again aroused, and made her heart beat with indignation and regret.

* * * *

Mrs. Winington was not surprised to receive a line of apology from Maitland; he found it necessary to leave for Edinburgh by the night train. "I wonder what his business in London really was?" she thought, as she threw the note into the waste-paper basket; "at any rate he is safe out of the way. When he meets Edith again she shall be Mrs. Leslie Beaton."

Another week had nearly passed by, and Edith had had no answer from Mrs. Miles. She saw less than ever of her brilliant hostess, who was much engaged assisting Lady Mary to choose her trousseau. Beaton, however, was constantly with her, always quietly attentive, and interested in all that interested her. She was growing quite at ease with him, and sincerely grateful for his ready friendly sympathy.

Mr. Tilly had paid her a visit, and stayed to luncheon, where he seemed anything but comfortable. He said that he and his excellent friend Dargan were going to arrange about her future residence, and introducing some little variety into her life, and was generally amiable and vague.

One Saturday morning, however, brought poor Edith two terrible letters. One from Mr. Dargan, announcing that as both Mr. Tilly and himself were of opinion that their ward should no longer be buried alive in a country village, they had accepted a very good offer for the cottage, and let it on lease. His sister, Mrs. Miles, would, he said, speak for herself. He only deeply regretted the circumstances which obliged her to leave her dear charge.

The other was from poor Mrs. Miles, and was a very incoherent production; it was even illegible here and there from big tears which had evidently fallen on the paper. She explained in a confused fashion that an aunt who had shown her kindness in former days was dying of a lingering illness and was quite alone; that she felt it her duty to go and nurse this relative to the last; that it broke her heart to leave her dear Edith, but it could not be avoided; that it would be almost the sorest day she ever had when she left the cottage and that would be on Tuesday next. Finally, she prayed God to bless her dear child, and restore them to each other.

Besides the letter a scrap of paper had been thrust into the envelope, on which was scrawled in tremulous characters these words: "I can't help myself, dear, I can't indeed. I'll tell you all yet: wait a bit, and burn this."

Edith read both letters twice before she took in their meaning; then the full sense of her desolation rushed upon her. Without a home, a tie, a claim on any one, what was she to do? what was to become of her? Only at breakfast a couple of hours ago, Mrs. Winington had been talking of a series of visits she had promised to pay to various country houses. Where was she to turn? The consciousness that she had money enough for all her needs was a sort of abstract idea that brought her no comfort.

There was a tinge of mystery, too, in this sudden wrenching asunder of the faithful Mrs. Miles and herself that completed her distress. Dargan was at the bottom of it. She had an instinct of distrust of Dargan; and Mr. Tilly, though so much nicer, was a mere puppet in his hands. She had no real friend on earth, but Mrs. Winington, and perhaps Mr. Beaton, though she had no right to trouble either. She gathered up these dreadful letters and ran to Mrs. Winington's private sitting-room, eager to confide her griefs to her only friend and receive counsel, but the room was empty.

Edith sat down, hoping Mrs. Winington might come in before going out, as she often did in the forenoon. Once more she read Mr. Dargan's letter, thinking right; I believe he loves her. I so specially gallantly he took it! He must never know I lied to him. Now this marriage must take place; and soon, cost what it may to every one concerned. How his eyes sought that door! Had she come in, they would have told everything in spite of his strength and self-control. Oh, how different he is from the weak wands of men that surround me!

* * * *

Edith returned from her sketching excursion, looking brighter and better than Mrs. Winington had seen her since the day on which she had wounded her with the speech she had put into Maitland's mouth.

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"She has just gone out," he returned, looking earnestly at her.

"How unfortunate! I wanted her so much," and a great sob would rise in her throat, in spite of her brave effort to be calm.

"What has happened?" asked Beaton, with grave sympathy. "Can I be of any use?"

Edith looked at him for a moment of doubt, and then broke out, "No, no, no one can be of any use to me! Mr. Dargan can do what he likes!"

"Old rascal! What has he been about?" asked Beaton, with an accent of real wrath that fitted Edith's mood exactly. "I see," he continued, "you have letters. Are they the trouble? Am I presuming too much if I ask to know what distresses you? My sister will not return for a couple of hours. It might be a relief to tell me, even me," with a grave smile.

"I should be very glad, as you are so good to care. Read these, and you will not wonder at my feeling desolate." She handed him the letters, and threw herself on the sofa with self-abandonment very new to her.

Beaton stood by the window and read both epistles in silence. Edith thought the time dreadfully long before he came across to where she sat, and returned them to her.

"Very hard lines for you," he said, "but I do not see how it is to be helped." (Edith had loyally burned poor Mrs. Miles' private scrap.)

"Don't you see it takes away from me any shadow of home! When Mrs. Winington goes I shall be quite, quite alone," cried Edith.

"And Jean has so many engagements," said Beaton, as if to himself, beginning to pace to and fro with a troubled air. "That will not last long, however. You can make a home where you choose."

"I am afraid I cannot! Where can I go? To some strange old lady who will not like me? for I do not get on with people. You must see that. I am misunderstood;" and she thought of Maitland.

"But when they know you they love you," cried Beaton, and continued his walk in silence, till Edith, placing her letters in her pocket, rose, saying, "Nothing can be done till I see Mrs. Winington."

"Stay, stay for a few minutes, Miss Vivian. I have a solution to propose," said Beaton, with agitation; "pray hear it patiently." He had thoroughly dramatic instincts, and threw himself into his part, be the part what it might.

Edith sat down again. He had so effectively played the calm friend that Edith hardly anticipated what was coming.

"I ought not perhaps to revert to my own wishes," he went on hurriedly—"wishes I have tried to resign, but cannot. Why, Edith, will you not accept a home with me? No, do not speak yet, hear me out." He sat down on the sofa beside her. "I can see plainly enough that you have no love for me. I feel too much for you not to perceive your indifference, but as a friend my society gives you some little pleasure. Do I flatter myself too much?"

"No, indeed!" cried Edith, eager to make some amends for her guilty coldness; "you are always nice and pleasant." Beaton smiled. "Then do you think it possible for me to make you happy? Dear Edith (I must call you Edith), you are so deliciously pure and simple, you don't know what love is. I will never believe you cared a straw for any man." Edith winced. "Let me try and teach you; I know your heart, your mind; I know the sort of life that would suit you; and though I may not be worthy of you, I am not a bad fellow. I have a good temper, and more heart than I thought I had, till you drew it to th. I am a poor man, and I cannot tempt you with wealth, but we shall have enough for a quiet life. We can wander about the continent, and revel in music and pictures, and make a home wherever we go. You are surely not so hard as to be unmoved by such true affection, such warm esteem as mine? If you accept me you can do what you will, independent of guardians or any other influence of that kind, and you will make one man very happy."

His quiet earnestness touched Edith; she hesitated and grew very grave as she thought it was quite possible she could be tranquil and happy with such a devoted friend. No one else had ever loved her except poor Mrs. Miles, and gratitude alone ought to make her appreciate a "free-will" offering like Beaton's love. He showed no conceited assurance that she was ready to love him on the smallest provocation. Why should she not accept him, and secure his kindly, tender protection? Why should she remain friendless any longer?

"Will you at least consider my proposal?" persisted Beaton, humbly, after a long pause.

"You are too good to me," said Edith softly. "I feel ashamed of not being in love with you; but I don't think I am, though I like you very much; and I am very, very grateful to you. I am greatly surprised that you care about me; I hardly deserve it. You could not like to have a wife who is not in love with you?"

"I should like you to be my wife on any terms," eagerly.

"Afterward you might be sorry; I am so different from—"

"That is your greatest charm," he interrupted. "You are so fresh, so unlike the women I have been accustomed to. Listen to me. I have had the offer of employment in Africa. If you accept me I will give it up; it is not a place I would take you to. If you refuse I will start next week, and never—I swear it—never return. My future is in your hands, do with it what you will."

To be continued.

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