

PERSEPHONE.

By the author of "Kate's Terrible Cousin," "The Stewards of Abolition," etc.

Valentine Lisle was a vagrant; his whole life had been one long violation of all social laws. When a boy he ran away from school; when a student he was politely requested to withdraw from the hands of his second term. Before he was twenty he quarreled with his father, left his home in consequence, and adopted art as a profession. For a time he got on splendidly, and was as happy and contented as it was possible for such a confirmed vagrant to be; but a few years exhausted his credit and wore out the patience of his friends; so, when there were no more uncles, godfathers, maiden aunts, or confiding cousins to pay his debts, people began to regard him with suspicion.

Then he settled down to work, lodged on the second floor of a great gloomy house, one of those melancholy streets in the vicinity of the Middlesex Hospital where artists of a certain class dearly love to congregate, wore a huge beard, sat or stood all day in his shirt sleeves, smoked incredible quantities of tobacco, consumed innumerable glasses of beer, and finally accepted the climax of his offense by marrying one of his models. This act severed the final threads that still bound him to his family. His mother, whose favorite he was, died because of it; his elder and only brother found it necessary to travel for two years after leaving the calamity; and his father formally disinherited him, without even the customary, though not very consolatory, shilling.

After a time old Sir Jasper was gathered to his fathers, without bestowing on the vagrant Val even his shilling and a Bohemian. Dina, his only daughter, married the only daughter of Lord Torpor, and lived as a respected and intensely respectable English county gentleman should live.

The bearded and Bohemian painter of Newburn Street, remained an alien and an outcast from his family. Dina, his only daughter, and his only child, he smoked his "canister," and drank his ale in the shade of his dingy studio, surrounded by grand pictures—historical pieces, ideal pieces, landscapes, heads after every imaginable artist, studies from life, and death, and a few more of the kind. Though his voice was shrill and rather high-pitched, and his temper at the best of times rather variable, she had her good points, and one of them was a talent for house-keeping. She made her husband's odd guineas go as far as anybody could, and always managed some good things to occur in the way of expenditure. When she was gone, Val missed the savory and appetizing stew which she concocted for supper, missed the tasty blonster she always endeavored to secure for his breakfast, missed the pleasant and healthy and nightly homily on the utterly ruinous state of their finances and the impossibility of their holding out any longer. Indeed it was a marvel how the shabby home in Newburn street was kept together so long. But Mrs. Lisle's management was not all that she bargains she seemed to be most incredible, and when she died, Val missed her solely and mourned her sincerely.

He had no one in the world then but Persephone, an olive-skinned, hazel-eyed girl of fifteen, straight-limbed, slender, graceful, with thick curling hair, bright blue eyes, and black hair curling over her head and shoulders. Call a girl Persephone, but it is unreasonable to expect her to be like other girls. Valentine Lisle, being in some respects a not unreasonable man, saw the force of this; and he did not expect his girl to be in the smallest way like other girls. Jane, Emmie or Polly might have been. Sometimes he feared she was not even going to be ornamental; for her features were sharp, her shoulders narrow, and her complexion was frequently of the hue of yellow ochre. But she was a Newburn girl, prematurely clever. Her paintings her father said, were as good as his own—in truth they were much better; she wrote poetry by the ream, read romances by the score, and had managed to pick up, no one knew how, a smattering of French, German and Italian.

Every one who met her, the near chumbers, and, as the little brothers and sisters one after another died, her father and mother more than over indulged, spoiled, praised and petted the somewhat selfish and imperious little lady who, by the right divine of genius, reigned over the shabby Newburn street. If Persephone—so they called her without silence, it was the signal for an abused fermentation to the dust of reproach and remonstrance that was so often performed in the parlor. If Persephone wanted pen or pencil, or paper, her need always charmed the last shilling and her mother's somewhat closely kept purse.

Pierse Lisle was not a very loving or perhaps a very lovable child. Here was a firm, resolute, self-contained nature, neither seeking sympathy nor giving affection. Her arms were never thrown carelessly around her mother's neck, her lips were never pressed against her father's, she never clung to his knee, clung to his neck, or used any other childish art to gain any pleasure or indulgence, possibly because all her wishes were granted as soon as they were expressed.

From the very first father and mother tacitly consented to give way to Pierse; for they felt they could not hold out against the resolution expressed by the sternly-contracted brows and compressed lips of a child who bore and met every rebuff with a fortitude that was an adult, and was never heard to express a wish that was impracticable or a complaint that was unreasonable.

Once, about a year after his wife's death, Val Lisle turned to his daughter for comfort and consolation. He tried to pour his wrongs, needs and difficulties into her ear, as he had done into her mother's; but the girl shrugged her shoulders little contemptuously and went on with her drawing.

"Why don't you try to get pupils, papa?" she said suddenly. "You teach much better than you point."

Val glanced curiously at the calm inscrutable face, and heaved a deep sigh. Pierse was right perhaps—she usually was—and his teaching, in her case at all events, had been successful. So he advertised for a pupil, and went on to teach her. Then she roused herself, laid aside her dreaminess and selfishness, and made the second floor in Newburn Street seem more like home to the poor vagrant artist than it had ever seemed before.

How much of the alteration was owing to the advent of Rex Davenant, the pupil, it is not easy to say; but certainly from the day he paid his preliminary visit Pierse was life and fervent. A brightness came into her face which gladdened the heart of her father, for it made her wonderfully beautiful, and beauty was still dear to the artist's soul. There was a soft stillness in her usually colorless cheeks, a gleam of brightness in her dark hazel eyes, music in her voice, and lightness in her step. In short, Pierse Lisle began to live from the day she first saw Rex Davenant standing in her shabby parlor, looking with undisguised admiration from the drawings of the artist's daughter to the girl herself.

He was a young man, not more than twenty, with dark wavy blue eyes, fair hair curled closely round his head, a heavy fair moustache, beautifully white teeth, and an honest, resolute, good humored chin. His face was not a particularly handsome, striking, or intellectual one; hundreds like it are to be seen in every town in England; but it was pleasant, honest, and radiant with kindness. One would never have taken Rex for the hero of a romance, nor for a great comic actor, in any circumstances, doing anything desperate; he was simply a good looking, healthy, happy young gentleman, with a loyal, lovable, truthful nature, and a pardonable craze for painting "muddled" pictures in water colors. He could afford to dawdle with art, being tolerably rich, an extravaganter, and possessed of splendid expectations.

Not the least charming of Rex was his capacity for making himself at home wherever he went. Before he had called half a dozen times at the house in Newburn street he seemed to belong to the place; and the great delight of Pierse's life was to make the parlor pleasant for him. He had three lessons a week—on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, from four to five; but, after a few months, he dropped in every evening as a matter of course. He ordered a pair of pictures to be painted in Serjeants' Inn, and Val worked Rex's light step on the echoing carpetless stairs, brushes and palette were flung aside, Pierse's pencils were thrust into the case, and father and daughter welcomed the pupil cordially.

After the first shock of her father's sudden death and the days of dull apathetic despair that followed, Pierse roused herself and endeavored to look her position fairly in the face. Young, friendless, inexperienced, poor, and imperfectly educated, how was she to earn her bread? What was she to do? Where was she to turn for advice and encouragement? In the first hours of her grief and despair she had written a half frantic letter to Rex, entreating him to come to her or write and tell her what to do. After a few days she wrote again more calmly and collectedly; she explained exactly how she was placed, and begged him to write her just line, as she was so lonely and unhappy. But to neither of her letters did she receive any answer; and, with bitter tears and a dull aching at her heart, Pierse came to the conclusion that he had forgotten her already.

It was very cruel and unkind of him, she thought, to forsake her in her great sorrow; and she sometimes felt as if it were more than ignorant of the world; and yet she had to learn her own way, and suffer and still be cheerful and even be merry and cheerful under the most crushing griefs.

After the funeral, Pierse thought once more what she had better do, and finally concluded to write to her uncle Jasper; he would perhaps help her in some shape or form—send her to school, where she might fit herself to be a governess, or procure her some occupation. It was a difficult matter to write to Sir Jasper, and cost many sighs and tears, and rained numerous sheets of note paper; but it was accomplished at last; and then she waited with restless impatience for the reply.

It came at last, and she was surprised to find a cold stiff formal invitation to Lisle Hall, without a single word of sympathy or affection, without even an apology for the delay in writing. One other letter Pierse wrote to Rex, and then she came to the conclusion that she was either to write every knock at the door, or to write every knock at the door, or to write every knock at the door.

Just before Christmas the pictures were finished, and Mr. Davenant gave the artist a cheque for sixty guineas—the largest sum Val had ever received for a pair of pictures in his life. He meant to do magnificent things with the money, to furnish his apartments, indeed they did not leave the room, street, altogether and seek some pleasant locality, buy himself a new ulster, Pierse a black silk dress that would "stand alone," and lots of beautiful "mounts" and frames for her drawings.

Christmas was going away for a month, and on Christmas Eve he called to say good-bye to them. Val was out and Pierse was bending over her drawing, giving the last touches to a perfect little sketch which she meant as a Christmas present for Rex. It was the parlor, with her father on one side of the fire, and her mother on the other, and Pierse herself seated in front, her face shaded with her hand, and The Modern Painters on her knee. Rex took up the drawing and glanced at it, first admiringly, then critically.

"I think you are doing very well," he said. "This sketch is simply perfect; the likenesses are unmistakable. Will you make your fortune as a portrait-painter one day, and then you will win fame as an artist. What are you going to do with it?"

"I thought I would give it to you," she said. "I thought you would like it, and you are so happy every time you see it." "Do you think I shall require anything to remind me of them, Pierse?" asked Rex, turning up her face with one hand and pushing back the thick curls from her forehead with the other. "Do you think I shall forget you for a single moment while I am away?"

"Yes, I am sure you will, for a great many moments. If you think of me sometimes, I shall be quite content," replied Pierse, with a glad, quick flush.

"I asked the young man, still holding up the little face. "Look at me and answer, Pierse." Pierse looked at him, but did not answer, except by a silence more eloquent than words, and with an expression of shy happiness in her eyes; but it seemed to satisfy Rex completely.

"You must not work too hard, petite," he said, stroking her hair fondly. "You must take great care of yourself while I am away. You must not spoil your eyes by painting too much or reading at night. And, Pierse, I resigned over to you the Newburn street, and I thought I would like to see you when I want you to wear always for my sake. Will you, little one?"

"Yes, always, with pleasure, Rex. Oh, how lovely!"—as he placed in her hand a velvet lined case containing a large gold locket set with diamonds. "Oh, Rex, how lovely!" she said, with a glad, quick flush.

"I'm glad you like it; but it's not half pretty enough for you. Nothing in the world is," he declared, looking with admiration at the lovely radiant little face. "Pierse, Pierse when you leave the solitude and seclusion of your studio, and go into the world, you will do some awful damage; something terrible is sure to happen!" And he laughed merrily. "Now good-bye, my child; take care of yourself and the dear parlor till I come back. Only a few short weeks and we'll begin our magnificent picture of 'The Last of the Mohicans'—my little gipsy, and a merry Christmas."

"Good-bye, Rex, and a happy Christmas," replied Pierse. "I'll think of you lots of times till we meet."

"And I'll go and do likewise—there! I've only eleven minutes to drive to Easton; and my coat must be fastened up. Good-bye, petite." And Rex pressed his lips lightly to the upturned, smiling, blushing face, and rushed out of the room and downstairs four steps at a time.

He arrived at Easton just in time to jump into his carriage, and to find that his portmanteau flung after him at random; and in three hours he was at home.

After Rex was gone Pierse opened her desk, and from a dozen pencil sketches of his face in every possible position she selected one which she thought the best, and fitted it into her locket; then she put the chain round her neck and the locket inside her dress, throwing all the other sketches into the fire; and she began a fresh one of the young gentleman as he looked in his rough ulster and kneeling-cap.

In the middle of her work she paused, with a gleam of light upon her face, as if she had change he would find in their rooms on his return. A new carpet, a soft fleecy rug, low comfortable chairs, a mirror, some vases and a few flowers would make a wonderful alteration. She would have her new silk dress, too, and would then, for the first time, wear her beautiful locket openly. Pierse had great idea of the fitness of things; and a gold locket set with diamonds over a shabby black Russel-cord dress smeared with paints, and in a room with dingy threadbare curtains and carpet and rickety furniture, would, she thought, be a very striking contrast.

As day she and her father had spent hours in plotting and planning, and had walked dozens of times to Tottenham Court and Hampstead roads to examine the furniture-shop windows by daylight and gaslight. Next week they would make up their minds, and go to the shops, and buy the things they were going to change he would find in their rooms on his return. A new carpet, a soft fleecy rug, low comfortable chairs, a mirror, some vases and a few flowers would make a wonderful alteration. She would have her new silk dress, too, and would then, for the first time, wear her beautiful locket openly. Pierse had great idea of the fitness of things; and a gold locket set with diamonds over a shabby black Russel-cord dress smeared with paints, and in a room with dingy threadbare curtains and carpet and rickety furniture, would, she thought, be a very striking contrast.

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"I thought I would give it to you," she said. "I thought you would like it, and you are so happy every time you see it." "Do you think I shall require anything to remind me of them, Pierse?" asked Rex, turning up her face with one hand and pushing back the thick curls from her forehead with the other. "Do you think I shall forget you for a single moment while I am away?"

"Yes, I am sure you will, for a great many moments. If you think of me sometimes, I shall be quite content," replied Pierse, with a glad, quick flush.

"I asked the young man, still holding up the little face. "Look at me and answer, Pierse." Pierse looked at him, but did not answer, except by a silence more eloquent than words, and with an expression of shy happiness in her eyes; but it seemed to satisfy Rex completely.

"You must not work too hard, petite," he said, stroking her hair fondly. "You must take great care of yourself while I am away. You must not spoil your eyes by painting too much or reading at night. And, Pierse, I resigned over to you the Newburn street, and I thought I would like to see you when I want you to wear always for my sake. Will you, little one?"

"Yes, always, with pleasure, Rex. Oh, how lovely!"—as he placed in her hand a velvet lined case containing a large gold locket set with diamonds. "Oh, Rex, how lovely!" she said, with a glad, quick flush.

"I'm glad you like it; but it's not half pretty enough for you. Nothing in the world is," he declared, looking with admiration at the lovely radiant little face. "Pierse, Pierse when you leave the solitude and seclusion of your studio, and go into the world, you will do some awful damage; something terrible is sure to happen!" And he laughed merrily. "Now good-bye, my child; take care of yourself and the dear parlor till I come back. Only a few short weeks and we'll begin our magnificent picture of 'The Last of the Mohicans'—my little gipsy, and a merry Christmas."

"Good-bye, Rex, and a happy Christmas," replied Pierse. "I'll think of you lots of times till we meet."

"And I'll go and do likewise—there! I've only eleven minutes to drive to Easton; and my coat must be fastened up. Good-bye, petite." And Rex pressed his lips lightly to the upturned, smiling, blushing face, and rushed out of the room and downstairs four steps at a time.

He arrived at Easton just in time to jump into his carriage, and to find that his portmanteau flung after him at random; and in three hours he was at home.

After Rex was gone Pierse opened her desk, and from a dozen pencil sketches of his face in every possible position she selected one which she thought the best, and fitted it into her locket; then she put the chain round her neck and the locket inside her dress, throwing all the other sketches into the fire; and she began a fresh one of the young gentleman as he looked in his rough ulster and kneeling-cap.

In the middle of her work she paused, with a gleam of light upon her face, as if she had change he would find in their rooms on his return. A new carpet, a soft fleecy rug, low comfortable chairs, a mirror, some vases and a few flowers would make a wonderful alteration. She would have her new silk dress, too, and would then, for the first time, wear her beautiful locket openly. Pierse had great idea of the fitness of things; and a gold locket set with diamonds over a shabby black Russel-cord dress smeared with paints, and in a room with dingy threadbare curtains and carpet and rickety furniture, would, she thought, be a very striking contrast.

After the first shock of her father's sudden death and the days of dull apathetic despair that followed, Pierse roused herself and endeavored to look her position fairly in the face. Young, friendless, inexperienced, poor, and imperfectly educated, how was she to earn her bread? What was she to do? Where was she to turn for advice and encouragement? In the first hours of her grief and despair she had written a half frantic letter to Rex, entreating him to come to her or write and tell her what to do. After a few days she wrote again more calmly and collectedly; she explained exactly how she was placed, and begged him to write her just line, as she was so lonely and unhappy. But to neither of her letters did she receive any answer; and, with bitter tears and a dull aching at her heart, Pierse came to the conclusion that he had forgotten her already.

It was very cruel and unkind of him, she thought, to forsake her in her great sorrow; and she sometimes felt as if it were more than ignorant of the world; and yet she had to learn her own way, and suffer and still be cheerful and even be merry and cheerful under the most crushing griefs.

After the funeral, Pierse thought once more what she had better do, and finally concluded to write to her uncle Jasper; he would perhaps help her in some shape or form—send her to school, where she might fit herself to be a governess, or procure her some occupation. It was a difficult matter to write to Sir Jasper, and cost many sighs and tears, and rained numerous sheets of note paper; but it was accomplished at last; and then she waited with restless impatience for the reply.

It came at last, and she was surprised to find a cold stiff formal invitation to Lisle Hall, without a single word of sympathy or affection, without even an apology for the delay in writing. One other letter Pierse wrote to Rex, and then she came to the conclusion that she was either to write every knock at the door, or to write every knock at the door, or to write every knock at the door.

Just before Christmas the pictures were finished, and Mr. Davenant gave the artist a cheque for sixty guineas—the largest sum Val had ever received for a pair of pictures in his life. He meant to do magnificent things with the money, to furnish his apartments, indeed they did not leave the room, street, altogether and seek some pleasant locality, buy himself a new ulster, Pierse a black silk dress that would "stand alone," and lots of beautiful "mounts" and frames for her drawings.

Christmas was going away for a month, and on Christmas Eve he called to say good-bye to them. Val was out and Pierse was bending over her drawing, giving the last touches to a