

# A DIFFICULT SITUATION;

OR, THE END CROWNS ALL.

## CHAPTER VI.—(Cont'd)

An already elaborately curled fringe had been curled with additional elaboration; it hung over her forehead and ears in an untidy confusion of small ringlets. A pale pink blouse, cut exaggeratedly low at the neck, and surmounted by a row of imitation pearl beads, had an absurd air of incongruity, worn, as it was, with a serge skirt that was both shabby and dirty. But the face that looked out from its frame of untidy curls was an extraordinarily pretty one—nay, Gertrude had to own that it was more than pretty; it was quite lovely. Big eyes, translucently blue in color, with the appealing glance of a child, looked shyly out from under long, curling lashes; in the cheeks mantled the dainty pink of a briar rose; the mouth was exquisitely curved; the oval of the face was perfect.

Directly she saw Lady Martindale her giggling ceased. The visitor's quiet dignity of bearing subdued the girl, who had never before come face to face with anyone the least like this tall woman. She shrank closer to Mrs. Dawson, her eyes dropped to the faded carpet; she was embarrassed with an embarrassment that was for once unfeigned. By nature she was a poseuse, but this was no pose.

"And you are Violet?" Lady Martindale asked. "You have told her why I asked to see her, Mrs. Dawson?"

There was a sudden uplifting of those innocent eyes, an equally rapid revelling of them with their curling lashes, and before Mrs. Dawson could speak, Violet said softly:

"Yes, she's told me—and oh! well, I'm sure I don't know how ever to believe it."

In speaking, she put her head a trifle on one side, and cast a beseeching glance through her eyelashes at Lady Martindale. "I'm sure its awfully good of you to come and look for me."

The cockney accent jarred on her listener's ears, but the childlike appeal in her eyes touched some soft spot still left in Gertrude's heart. "I want to find out all about you," she said, more gently than she had yet spoken, putting her hand on the girl's shoulder, "there are a great many questions to be asked and answered, and a great many proofs to be produced before we can be certain, but I think, perhaps, you may be my husband's daughter."

"Ma said that, too," Violet answered, an awed expression in her eyes, an incredulous smile parting her lovely lips; "my goodness, I didn't believe her when she told me about it. All this time I just thought I belonged here, and now, lo! it does seem funny—like a story book—if I don't belong here at all."

"We have to find out exactly where you do belong," Gertrude Martindale said; "nothing can be decided until my solicitors have looked into every detail."

"The lady's quite right, Vi," Mrs. Dawson said soothingly, as a shadow fell over the girl's face, "it wouldn't be me, if I didn't say, 'make as strict an enquiry as ever you can.' I was always one to be open and above board; there's nothing the solicitors can't see into whenever her ladyship wishes."

"Would you—would I—?" Violet began eagerly, her eyes fixed on Gertrude's face, when the landlady again broke in—

"Of course, if the solicitors was to find everything right—which they will find—why, then, it'll be a sad day for me, though a joyful one for you, Vi. It ain't likely as I shall take it easy partin' with a child what has been like my own for eighteen years." Into Violet's liquid eyes came a shadow of sadness, her mouth drooped at the corners, she turned to the landlady with a little impulsive gesture.

"Would I have to go away from you, ma?" she said. "I don't know how I should be able to put up with living away from you. Would I have to go right away from here?" she asked, turning back to Gertrude, and speaking in faltering accents.

A doubt thrust itself into Lady

Martindale's mind. Was this speech elaborate acting, or was it genuine? Were the girl's gestures feigned or real? She felt ashamed of her doubts, for there were actually tears in Violet's eyes, and her lips quivered—yet she doubted.

"I cannot say anything definite this morning," was Lady Martindale's reply. "my solicitor, Mr. Strachey, will call here and will go into all the necessary investigations. After that, we can decide about the future."

"I was thinkin'," Mrs. Dawson said, her eyes watching Lady Martindale with furtive anxiety, "you might like to see what I've got belonging to Violet's father and mother, likewise her mother's marriage lines."

Gertrude looked at the woman, her heart throbbing painfully. It seemed to her that Godfrey's anticipation and her own were about to be fulfilled to the letter. If this girl—this lovely, mincing little cockney—were actually Jasper's daughter by a former marriage, Godfrey would no longer ultimately inherit the estates of Standon Towers; she herself would no longer have any right to remain in the house of her married life. A vision of the small dower house at the bottom of the park rose before her mental vision, but she showed no outward traces of the tumult raging within.

"Yes, I should like to see what you have that belonged to Violet's mother," she said, "and the marriage lines, too. Were they left in your care?"

"They were in the bag that belonged to the pore dear, Vi's mother. Mr. Marsh, he left the bag behind him in all his trouble, pore young feller, and he never come back for it, nor left no address for him again. I kept the things in the bag, and you're welcome to look them over."

It was a painful little collection that lay presently upon the dining-room table, under Gertrude's eyes. A lump rose in her throat, her eyes grew misty, as her hands fingered the commonplace articles that had belonged to the dead girl. There were very few of them. An ebony brush with a silver M upon it; some old scraps of lace; a pair of well-worn shoes; a broken work-box; some articles of clothing, a blotting-book, and a tiny prayer-book bound in silver. This last Gertrude opened with reverent fingers, reading on the fly-leaf the words:

"From Marjory. For Remembrance. Haslemere. April 17th, 1883."

The date was one of nearly nineteen years before, and Gertrude wondered what special event that prayer-book memorialised. Had it been the first meeting of Jasper and the blue-eyed girl of the miniature? Had April 17th been their wedding day? or what remembrance did the prayer-book stand?

"And these are the marriage lines," Mrs. Dawson's voice interrupted Gertrude's train of thought awakened by the inscription in the prayer-book; "They was put away careful in that blotting-book."

Lady Martindale unfolded the paper held out to her, and her eyes ran down the official form which set beyond a doubt the truth that Jasper had been married before he met her. The copy of the marriage certificate was written in a clear, scholarly hand, and set forth that—"Jasper Marsh, bachelor, had married by licence, in Haslemere Parish Church, on April 17th, 1883, Marjory Falkner, spinster, in the presence of two witnesses, John Smith, Parish Clerk, and Martha Smith, his wife."

Appended to the certificate was the signature of the clergyman, David Allnutt.

"Thank you," Gertrude said, when she had finished reading the above, "it seems quite plain and straightforward, but my solicitor will look into it all—and I suppose you had the baby christened?"

"Well, no, your ladyship. We being dissenters, we didn't hold with it. But she was registered—my pore husband, he run out and registered her, as the pore father couldn't think of such things, with his wife dead. So my husband registered her, and not knowing the gentleman and lady's names, he just put J. and M. Marsh for the parents. He come home and tell me.

I remember as if it was yesterday. And she was vaccinated, too, my lady, Violet was."

"Yes, yes; but no baptismal certificate?"

"No, my lady; but there's one more thing," Mrs. Dawson said, obsequiously, "there's a locket, what was round the pore thing's neck when she died—the nurse, she put it on the baby afterwards, and Vi, she've always wore it. Show the lady, dear."

Violet fumbled with her pink blouse, and drew from its folds a fine gold chain of curious workmanship. At the end of it hung a locket shaped like a heart.

"The pore young man's face is inside," Mrs. Dawson volunteered, "and a bit of his hair, too. Vi, she don't favor her pa at all, 'im bein' dark, and she so fair. But she's the moral of her pore mother."

Gertrude remembered the blue eyes and lovely coloring of the pictured face she had seen in Jasper's despatch-box, and she could have groaned aloud over the truth of Mrs. Dawson's words. In the girl before her there were exactly the same delicate coloring, the same deep blue eyes, and if the expression of the two faces was different, if one bore all the marks of good breeding which the other lacked, might not that difference be accounted for by difference of environment and upbringing?

With a sigh Lady Martindale took in her hand the heart-shaped locket, which Violet detached from the chain. Opening it she glanced at the curl of dark hair on one side, the handsome boyish face on the other; and as she looked, her heart contracted with pain. The face that smiled out at her was the face of the lover of her own youth, the Jasper who had wooed her impetuously, and seemed to love her so passionately; the bright, dark eyes, alight with love and laughter, that looked up now from the pictured face, had once looked into hers with just such laughter and love. This was indeed Jasper—Jasper who had loved her, and broken her heart—Jasper, her husband!

## CHAPTER VII.

"She's most uncommonly pretty, Gertrude. There is no denying that. You must own that, in spite of all her drawbacks, she is perfectly lovely."

"I am quite willing to own it. She is pretty, in a milliner's assistant sort of way. I have not attempted to deny her prettiness. No—I will be just—she is lovely, quite lovely! but there are so many drawbacks."

"You cannot pretend to be very pleased to have found her so easily? It is not a lucky find, either for you or me, and yet, one cannot grudge the girl what is obviously hers by right."

"Oh, yes, yes! it is her own by right, Godfrey, and I am going to do my duty by her, because I feel I ought to do it. But the task is not insipid, and I feel none of the exaltation conscious virtue ought to bring. I don't like the girl, and I can't pretend to like her, but I don't grudge her the inheritance. I only wish she was a lady."

Lady Martindale's lips closed in a way that Godfrey had once thought a delightful indication of the determination of character he had admired in her. He did not feel quite sure now that the sharp closing of her mouth did not indicate a hitherto unnoticed hardness in her beautiful face. And as she lifted her eyes, the conviction forced itself upon him that their expression too was hard. Although he recognized the truth of her words, he felt illogically vexed with her for comparing her newly-found step-daughter to a milliner's assist-

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ant. In fact, for some reason which he did not even attempt to define, he felt irritated at Gertrude's speech about her newly-found step-daughter. He was half ashamed of the irritation.

They were both in the sitting-room of her hotel. He stood beside the mantelpiece, looking down upon her bent head, and, as the firelight flashed full upon her face it showed the clear, well-cut features, the beauty that was the beauty of a woman intellectually as well as physically well-equipped, and yet Sir Godfrey still felt that odd irritation against her. He had always admired his cousin's wife. From the day he had first met her, in the young grace of her nineteen years, when she was a newly-married and happy wife, until to-day, when youth's eagerness had given place to the quiet dignity of thirty-five years, when all her illusions were shattered, and she was a widow whose married life carried only a record of misery and bitterness, Godfrey had never ceased to admire and respect her. Sometimes, indeed, her husband's cousin had experienced a rush of warmer feeling towards the beautiful, stately woman who endured so much, and so uncomplainingly. But a certain natural rectitude combined with a disgust of everything which went against a gentleman's code, had prevented him from allowing himself to give any expression to those warmer feelings. And now, as his eyes met Gertrude's, marking their hard gleam, he felt glad that he had not been tempted to show his cousin's wife the extent of his affection for her. He was glad the relations between them had never gone be-

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yond those of simple friendliness. His reflections so absorbed him that he was oblivious of his companion's next speech, and when she said, with a touch of sarcasm: "Don't you think so, Godfrey, or were you not listening to a word I said?" he flushed and laughed uneasily.

(To be continued.)

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