

A DIFFICULT SITUATION;

OR, THE END CROWNS ALL.

CHAPTER XI.—(Cont'd)

"And all the time, Violet is not sure whether it will be worth while to marry him or not: whether he will adequately fill the place of someone called Jem Stibbard!"

The thought flashed through Joy's mind, and that evening, when the two girls were going to bed, it recurred to her again. This time it came with an uneasy wonder whether Violet was living quite such a simple and straightforward life as appeared on the surface; or whether she was trying to play a double game, keeping her hold upon the old love, whilst dallying with the new.

Joy was sitting before the fire, slowly brushing her hair, and thinking of Violet's incomprehensible character, and yet more incomprehensible conversation, when a tap on her door was followed by the entrance of Violet herself—a lovely vision in the palest of pale blue wrappers, trimmed with filmy lace, that gave her a touch of ethereal beauty. Her hair lay about her shoulders like a cloud of gold; her eyes shone like two stars, and Joy, looking up at her, caught her breath quickly.

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"I just thought I'd like to show you the photos—of some of my old friends," Violet said, coming close to the fire and kneeling down beside Joy's chair. "I've never had anybody to show things to since I came here. Lady Martindale's too stiff and grand, and, of course, Sir Godfrey"—she punctuated her unfinished sentence with one of those giggles which so hopelessly betrayed her lack of breeding; but the pathos of her words struck the sensitive ear of the girl who heard them, and she forgot the rest.

"I've never had anybody to show things to since I came here!"

With a wave of sympathy Joy seemed to see and understand Violet's isolation at Standon Towers, and what that isolation must have meant to a girl accustomed to the society of friends of her own age and class. The little pathetic look in Violet's eyes touched an answering chord in Joy's heart; she put out her hand and laid it on the other's shoulder.

"Do show me the photographs," she said; "it must sometimes feel lonely for you here, without your old friends and surroundings."

"Sometimes—I just loathe it!" Violet rejoined, in a sudden burst of frankness. "It's the stiffness I hate. There's such a lot of things you mustn't do, and a lot more you've got to do in a different way; and I'm sharp enough to know my maid Ellen laughs up her sleeve at me because I don't do everything pat off. It isn't my fault my father left me to be brought up the way he did. I should say it was me that should be ashamed but that he ought to be ashamed of himself for neglecting his daughter so abominably."

"Oh, hush!" Joy's touch was very gentle. "It doesn't seem quite right to speak of one's father like that. And, when people are dead, don't you think it's best only to remember only the good things about them?"

"I don't know anything good about my father," Violet answered mutinously. "He let me be brought up in—well, in a poor sort of way, whilst he was living here in luxury."

Not even in her confidences to Joy had Violet ever indulged the precise nature of her early environment. Without exactly saying it in so many words, she had led Joy to believe that her early life had been passed amongst genteel, middle-class folk, probably, Joy surmised, of the shopkeeper class. The actual truth about her upbringing and youthful surroundings was far removed indeed from Joy's imaginings, and the innate truthfulness of her own nature making it almost impossible to her to doubt other people she was, as Violet would have put it, "easy enough to gull."

"Never mind," she said, in response to Violet's outburst, "don't think now about what is past and done with. You have all the loveliness and luxury here for your own, and you really are a very

lucky girl."

"Oh, well — perhaps"—Violet shrugged her pretty shoulders; "only I don't like to think that cat, Carry Shrimpton, is having it all her own way now I'm gone."

"Carry Shrimpton?" "We were a good bit about together, she and I; she was a bosom friend of mine—once; only I found out she was a cat, trying to make up to Jem and the others when my back was turned. Not that Jem ever looked at her twice. He didn't care a scrap for anybody but me. This is him." From a packet of photographs she drew out one and laid it in Joy's lap. The girl was sore put to it what to say about the vulgar-looking youth, whose prominent eyes stared up at her, and whose facetious smile gave her a sense of repulsion. But Violet saved her the trouble of saying anything, for she went on speaking herself, fast and eagerly.

"He's awfully good-looking — quite in a different style from Sir Godfrey"—"Quite," Joy commented inwardly—"not such clear-cut, severe features. But he's awfully good-looking, all the same! Then these"—she placed several more photographs before Joy—"these are some of my other friends."

A strange medley of faces, male and female, looked up at Joy, who falteringly tried to express interest in the vulgar, fatuous countenances, trying to put herself in Violet's place and to see these curious beings with her eyes. Violet talked excitedly about each photograph, but it needed no deep perception on the part of her listener to realize that the gentleman who called himself Jem Stibbard had a place in her affections quite apart from the others, and Joy received a startling confirmation of her surmises, for, as Violet rose to go, gathering her photographs together, a letter dropped from the folds of her wrapper and fell at Joy's feet. The signature and the date fell uppermost; the bright light of the fire fell full upon them, and it was impossible for Joy not to read what was so plainly written in a large untidy handwriting—"Your most loving, Jem."

The date was the date of two days before, and as Violet, with glowing eyes, stooped to pick up the letter, her eyes looked defiantly at Joy.

"I suppose you saw what was written?" she said.

"I am very sorry, but I couldn't help seeing."

"Oh! it's all right," Violet spoke flippantly. "I've known Jem since we were babes. We're really like brother and sister, and he writes to me the same as if he was. I suppose"—after a pause—"I suppose you won't think it necessary to go and talk over what I've told you and all this with Lady Martindale?"

Joy sprang to her feet. "Of course not!" she said indignantly. "I don't repeat things people say to me in confidence. But, Violet, you wouldn't do anything underhand, would you? Anything that would really deceive Lady Martindale?"

"Goodness, no!" Violet looked into Joy's face with eyes as limpidly candid as those of a child. "There's no harm in me and Jem going on being friends. He's just like a brother, honor bright, he is." And looking again into Joy's face with the straightforward glance of perfect candour, Violet left the room, leaving Joy with a confused sense that something was wrong, yet with an honorable woman's conviction that Violet's words, "honor bright," set her statements beyond a possibility of doubt: she assured herself that all was as it should be, so completely is a woman of honor at the mercy of one to whom the very words honor and honorable mean nothing, and less than nothing.

CHAPTER XII.

The winter days were lengthening; in the air there was that first touch of spring which even an early February will bring us. A purple tinge was creeping over the cypresses; already the elm boughs showed a deepening red; there were snowdrops in the dell beside the lake, and crocuses flamed orange, white, and purple in the garden-beds at Standon Towers. To Joy, that first hint of spring in the softness of the

February air was intoxicating. Towards sunset she walked slowly back from the village, drinking in the mossy fragrance of the hedges, the indescribable odor of the fields, that subtle promise of spring which penetrated to the innermost depths of her being—something within her shouted for joy as loudly as the thrushes were shouting from the woods.

"Spring's coming! spring's coming! spring's coming!"

The song of the thrush quickened the beat of her pulses, bringing a queer little lump into her throat. Involuntarily her thoughts travel led back to the day, now two months ago, when Roger had seen her off at Waterloo, when Roger's hand had held hers in so close a clasp, and Roger's eyes had looked into hers with an expression which, even now when she was alone in the lane, brought a flush to her face. She did not try to analyze either Roger's glance or her own sensations: Joy was not given to introspection; her nature was of too wholesome and sane a texture for self-analysis. But her own heart and senses were in tune with the coming spring that was close at hand; some answering chord within her vibrated to the chord that was being set in motion all over the land. She paused beside a gate into a field, and, leaning against it, looked out with a smile over the wide landscape. The good brown earth beyond was already ploughed and ready soon to be sown; or the sheltered hedge to her right the yellow catkins swung in the breeze; beyond the brown field a vista of hills and woodland spread out in a vast expanse, melting into the blue distance like a stretch of ocean. Across the sunset sky, a daffodil yellow, rooks wheeled homewards, their melodious voices mingling with the tinkle of sheep-bells in the meadows and the calling of the thrushes across the copse below the gate.

"What a lovely world!" the girl exclaimed aloud, putting out her hands towards the sweep of country at her feet. "What a lovely world! that knows spring is just waiting to open the door and come in." And with a happy smile still on her face she was turning away from the gate, when her attention was caught and held by a murmur of voices coming from the hazel copse. The tones were a little raised; it seemed as if both voices were talking together, and that a lively altercation was in progress, and Joy, not wishing to disturb the impression wrought upon her by the peaceful evening, quickened her steps, when they were arrested by a high, angry laugh whose tones she at once recognized. That shrill laugh was unmistakable. How often she had seen Lady Martindale wince when Violet's laugh rang out across the drawing-room! But why was Violet here, in the hazel copse, when she had most plainly said at luncheon that she intended driving into the town in the dog-cart to do some shopping? Indeed, Joy had seen her start from the house and drive down the road towards Stansworth; it was impossible that, in the time, she could have driven to Stansworth and back and be in the hazel copse now. And yet—that laugh sounded like hers! Perhaps, Joy reflected, she was wrong; she tried to assure herself that her ears were deceiving her. How could Violet be there, and to whom could she be talking out here amongst the hazels? The laugh rang out again, and this time a trifle nearer the lane, and Joy's eyes grew startled. She could no longer doubt the evidence of her own senses; no one but Violet laughed just like that, and a second later Violet's voice drifted across the field to the ears of the petrified listener.

"No, Jem, don't—don't be silly! Well, if I let you kiss me—you aren't to take too much for granted!"

A man's voice replied, its vulgar intonation travelled far on the still

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air: Joy heard it plainly.

"I've got to know you aren't playing fast and loose with me—I can't take that for granted; I don't trust you enough for that, my fine lady. There's a god deal of talk in the village about you and that darned swell, Sir Godfrey! If I thought him and you was carrying on together, I'd kill him as soon as look at him!"

"Oh, Jem!" Violet's voice exclaimed; and, having heard so much of the dialogue, for the simple reason that horrified amazement had held her in dumb dismay by the gate, Joy now turned and fled up the lane, her mind seething with disgust and indignation, only conscious of the desire to put the greatest possible distance between herself and the two speakers, who must shortly emerge from the copse. She did not pause in her breathless flight until she had nearly reached the lodge gates of Standon Towers, and here she waited to get her breath and to regain composure before entering the house. To confront Lady Martindale in a panting condition and showing traces of confusion, was the last thing she wished, for Gertrude's eyes were observant; she would have seen any signs of unusual emotion in Joy, and would have questioned her accordingly.

The girl slipped quietly upstairs to her own room, and before going down to tea washed her flushed face, reduced her tumbled hair to some semblance of order, and removed from her gown the appearances of her hasty flight down the lane. When she went into the drawing-room a quarter of an hour later, her face was still flushed, her eyes very bright, but Lady Martindale, looking up from her book with a smile, merely thought this due to the fresh spring air and to the girl's quick walking.

"You look as if you enjoyed the hint of spring we have got today," she said, smiling again in response to Joy's smile, and repressing a wish that her step-daughter might have been more like this sweet-eyed, gentle-voiced girl.

"One can almost hear the birds and flowers say 'Spring's coming,'" Joy answered, glad for a few moments to thrust from her mind all the uncomfortable recollections of its pleasant side. "I found periwinkles in flower on one sheltered bank, and there is a sort of delicious look about the hedges and trees as though they were just waiting on tiptoe to begin to shoot into leaf. And the birds! The thrushes couldn't sing loudly enough in that copse close to the great view." Joy had named the outlook from the gate by which she often lingered "the great view." The vast space of country under the over-arching dome of sky gave her an abiding sense of restfulness, and the very thought of it now soothed some of the turmoil of disgust in her mind.

"I am glad you like our beautiful country," Lady Martindale answered, handing Joy her tea. "Our big blue distances appeal to me as nothing else does anywhere; they make one feel that all the little worries are, after all, so very unimportant, and that the poet was right when she said—

"And I love to think God's greatness
Lies around our incompleteness—
Round our restlessness—His rest."

Joy's eyes flashed a glance of un-

derstanding into the face of the elder woman. It was so seldom that Lady Martindale, in spite of all her gracious courtesy, ever broke through her natural reserve, that this sudden revelation of her inner thoughts both touched and pleased the girl.

"Aunt Rachel loves those words, too," she said simply; "she never let any of the little worries trouble her. She has a dear little homely verse of her own that she always quotes:

"Do your best,
Leave the rest."

and she says it has helped her over and over again when things seemed difficult."

"Your aunt must have a very beautiful nature," Lady Martindale answered, looking thoughtfully into Joy's face; "she seems to have given you such a hopeful, sunny outlook on life. You are very suitably named."

"Aunt Rachel says that, too. She thinks that my father and mother were very, very happy together because I have always been so happy by nature."

"Then you lost them both—your father and mother—when you were very young?"

"I don't remember either of them. I was a tiny baby when—"

The little story of her life was abruptly broken in upon by the quick opening of the door, and by Violet's entrance, with the words—"Oh! I am glad to find tea. I'm as tired as a dog at a fair!"

(To be continued.)

POOR BABY.

"Nurse, has the baby had a powder?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And those hypophosphites?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"And the magnesia?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did you put a poultice on his back?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And a cold compress on his chest?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And he's no better?"

"No, ma'am."

"How strange! I think we had better send for the doctor."

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