

A DIFFICULT SITUATION;

OR, THE END CROWNS ALL.

CHAPTER XII.—(Cont'd)

No one could have showed less appearance of fatigue, and Joy thought she had never seen her young employer look more lovely. Violet's eyes shone brilliantly, there was a delicious color in her cheeks, the wind had ruffled her hair till it looked like a bright halo about her head. She had taken off her hat before coming into the room, and when she flung herself into a chair with her head against a background of pale blue cushions, Joy felt as if she was looking at some daintily exquisite picture.

"What has tired you, my dear?" Lady Martindale said gently: almost invariably in speaking to her step-daughter her voice took a gentler tone, as if, Joy thought, she were trying to atone for a want of affection towards the girl by giving her a larger amount of courtesy.

"Driving in the town, and shopping, and things," Violet answered with a little yawn; "and I walked up from the lodge just for a bit of exercise," she added; whilst Joy, listening in silent astonishment, wondered at the glibness with which the half-truths or whole lies (she could not determine which) flowed from the girl's tongue. She would, perhaps, have been still more astonished had she known what an exceedingly small fraction of truth lay behind Violet's words; for, as an actual fact, the girl had not driven into the town at all, but, alighting from the dog-cart in the village, she had informed the groom that she had forgotten a call she must pay at the rectory, that she would give up her visit to the town, and he could drive on without her and give her orders to the shops. With her shrewd knowledge of characters and classes, she was quite well aware that neither her step-mother nor Joy would dream of questioning either the man or herself about the afternoon's outing; with a half-pitying, half-envious contempt she knew that they would believe whatever she elected to tell them without demur or doubt, and, whilst despising them for their credulity, she played upon it for her own purpose. Had either of them seen the dog-cart returning without her, she was ready with the plausible excuse that she had longed just for a little exercise, and the information that she had walked up from the lodge was thrown in promiscuously, as a piece of useful color.

Joy watched her curiously. Her big blue eyes never wavered as she talked gaily of the town and the shops; she looked from one to the other of her listeners with the innocent look of a child pouring out a recital of its doings; but when she laughed Joy shivered. The laugh reminded her of the hazel glances of the conversation she had unintentionally overheard, of the man's vulgar voice, of his hateful threats. She lost the thread of Violet's discourse, and was only aroused by the laughing question—"Whatever are you dreaming about, Joy? I've asked you twice what you've been doing with yourself this afternoon."

"I went for a walk," Joy answered confusedly, with an odd sense of guilt; "everything is so delicious to-day."

"Hasn't Cousin Godfrey come?" Violet interrupted her. "He was coming to arrange about a ride for to-morrow. I thought he would have been here by this time," and, as she spoke, she bridled a little, and shot a glance at Lady Martindale, a glance for which Joy longed to strike her lovely, smiling face.

"Perhaps he has been detained," Lady Martindale answered—and Joy detected in her voice the little note of stiffness which Violet's remarks about Sir Godfrey and her intimate knowledge of his movements always brought there; "he is a busy person, you know."

"He isn't generally too busy to do the things I want," Violet said, bridling again and smiling a significant smile that again roused all Joy's indignation. "We were planning a lovely expedition to the sea. Cousin Godfrey said he could easily ride down to Barthing if we started directly after lunch."

"Quite easily," Lady Martindale's voice was cold; she could not hinder the quick flash of memory that reminded her how she and Godfrey had taken that identical ride more than once during the weeks following Jasper's death a year and more ago. And although Joy did not hold the clue to that flash of memory she saw and understood how bitter to the elder woman was Violet's assumption of special rights and special claims upon Sir Godfrey's time and thoughts. The brief conversation she had heard in the copse pushed itself into the forefront of her mind; she longed to cry aloud to Violet:

"How dare you talk like that about Sir Godfrey, when all the time you are secretly seeing your old lover—when you are playing fast and loose with the two men? Why can't you be honest with one of them?"

To the girl reared with the loftiest ideals of honor and uprightness, a character like Violet's with its unborn love of intrigue and instinctive delight in the underhand, was as incomprehensible as the habits and customs of Ojibway Indians, and Violet's smiling, innocent face and gay, nonchalant voice were revelations to Joy, whose knowledge of the lovely heiress's secret weighed upon her like lead.

Ought she to tell Violet how much she had unwittingly discovered? Ought she even, perhaps, to speak to Lady Martindale of what she had heard? Or might she do what her own craven wishes urged upon her, and leave the whole matter to adjust itself without her help?

"What would Roger tell me to do?" was the question revolving in her mind when, presently, she was alone in her own room. What view would Roger take of this—this very great difficulty in her new situation? Roger had always been her mentor, the friend to whom she could go for counsel when hard problems arose to be solved, and she could not make it quite clear to herself how Roger would advise her now. It was a great relief to her that Violet did not seek her room that night, or attempt to pour out to her any further confidences; she felt that before Violet again made her a confidante, she must decide what her own course of action ought to be; and when, early in the morning she found herself going over the problem again, and unable to sleep, she got up and dressed, determined to go out into the garden and let the fresh air of day-break help her to some solution.

In the old Manor House garden at Mottesley she had been so accustomed to go out at all hours of the day and night that there seemed to her nothing strange in passing along the dim, silent corridors at the Towers, down the wide staircase, and across the still, dark hall to the side door whose key she could take with her on her early rambles. Thompson's hair would certainly have stood on end could he have seen her fumbling with the bars and bolts, and his orthodox soul would have revolted at the bare thought that any young lady belonging to his "family" could wish to go into the garden at such an unprecedented hour. But Thompson still lay snoring in bed, and Joy had not only the whole house, but also the whole garden to herself when she stepped out into the grey half-light of early day. Nothing was stirring but the birds, and they were awake and singing their morning hymns in a chorus of melodious sweetness that gave Joy a sudden wish to lift up her own voice and sing too. Dew lay heavy on the lawn; the trees in the park were emerging from the mists of morning and showing a lacework of bare boughs

against a background of pearly sky, and in the dimness the crocuses gave the only note of color, lifting their bright gem-like heads above the brown earth in the beds and the short grass of the lawn. The fragrance of growing things was in the air, and Joy drew a long breath of delight. She had no conscious aim for her wanderings; she was out of doors simply because she longed for the open air, for a wide space of earth and sky, for room, as it were, in which to think, and she walked down one garden path and up another, noticing very little where she was going until she reached a small gate that opened into the lane. Still thinking very little of any definite destination for her wanderings, she opened the gate and sauntered slowly along the lane, whilst the greyness melted slowly out of the sky, before the breaking of day, and bars of golden light in the east heralded the coming of the sun. Without being precisely conscious of her own intentions, she was nevertheless making her slow way towards her favorite "great view," and though her thoughts were too absorbed in Violet, and in her own duty towards Violet, to allow her her face, so that she laughed softly, from sheer gladness of heart.

"Nothing can go on being hard for long in such a lovely world," she said, nodding her head to a thrush who contemplated her gravely from a neighboring hawthorn. "I expect I shall find a way out of the difficulty." And with this philosophical reflection, and one more glance over the sunlit country, she was turning back along the lane when her attention was caught by a glimpse of something fluttering in the morning breeze from the ditch in the bend of the lane behind her. With the flash of sunlight still on her face, the joy of the sunrise filling her heart, she moved forward a few paces to investigate the fluttering white object; then, with a low cry of dismay she started back, white, trembling, and sick with horror; for, lying at her feet in the ditch was a limp huddled body, the body of a man whose face was turned to the hedge, from whose hand floated the handkerchief which had first drawn her eyes to the spot.

Was he asleep? Was he unconscious? Or—was he—dead?

CHAPTER XIII.

For many seconds Joy stood in the lane, coward fear holding her motionless, her heart beating in sickening thumps, humanity urging her to look more closely at the prostrate man, craven terror whispering to her to run to the lodge or to the village and get help from there. But to whatever rank of life Joy's forbears had belonged, they had not been a race of cowards; and choking down her fears, trying not to allow her nervous imaginings to drive her into panic-stricken flight, she moved nearer to the

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huddled heap in the ditch, and stooping over him touched his arm. "Are you ill?" she said tremulously, her own voice awakening startling echoes in the quiet lane. "Are you hurt? Can I help you?"

But her touch on the limp arm produced no answering movement; there was no reply to her trembling, yet, when she reached the gate everything else faded into insignificance before the wonder of what lay spread out beneath her eyes.

In the east the sky was a flame of living gold, and a golden haze lay over the outspread landscape. The rich brown of the ploughed field in the foreground, the purple softness of the hazels, the amber of the larches against the dark green of the pines—these were definite notes of color melted into indefinite greens and duns and browns, until all were caught together into that far-off golden haze on the very rim of the world. Every confusing problem, every harassing thought, slipped from Joy's mind. She could only lean on the gate, as

she had leant upon it during the previous afternoon, and drink in the loveliness with eager, happy eyes.

"I wish Roger could see it, too," she breathed, rather than spoke, the words. "Roger and I do love the sunrise," and as she spoke the sun flashed up over the horizon's rim and shot a shaft of light upon long questions, and to her frightened eyes it seemed as if the silent figure in the ditch had become only more awfully silent, because of the echoes of her voice.

(To be continued.)

"How did Thompson get so bald?" "Oh, half his hair came out through worrying about a girl." "But how did he lose the other half?" "Oh, that came out after the girl married him!"

The pretty girl was lavishing a wealth of affection on her mastiff, and the very soft young man was watching her. "I wish I were a dog," he said laughingly. "Don't worry," she answered, "you'll grow."

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