A DIFFICULT SITUATION;

OR, THE END CROWNS ALL.

CHAPTER XIV.—(Cont'd)

"It wasn't exactly an accident, was it?" Joy answered impetuously, "somebody did his best to murder you. Oh, Violet has been dreadfully anxious, dreadfully upset! She has looked like the miserable ghost of herself."

"Poor little girl!" The tenderness in Godfrey's voice was a revelation to his listener. Then suddenly he pulled himself upright on the couch, and leant towards Joy, whispering—

"I suppose Violet has no idea who—I mean—I suppose nobody has any notion who my assailant was?"

"I believe he knows who knocked him down"—the quick thought flashed into Joy's mind—"and I believe he knows it had something to do with Violet." But aloud she only answered:

"First of all the police fancied they had a clue, but now they seem to be doubtful about it again."

"In any case I should not prosecute": Sir Godfrey still sat upright, leaning towards the girl, who was in a low chair by the fire—"when you write to Violet, tell her this. She may be interested to know that even if they find the man who struck me down I do not intend to prosecute. As far as I am concerned, he will go scot-free!"

"He certainly knows the truth," Joy reflected again.

CHAPTER XV.

"Dear Joy,—Please write and tell me how Cousin Godfrey is. I am staying with Mrs. Dawson, who took care of me when I was a little girl. I could not bear Standon Towers, when Doctor Giles said Cousin Godfrey was dying. Have they found the person who did it?—Yours, VIOLET.

"Address your answer to c/o, Mrs. Jones, Stationer, Kilburn High Road, N.W."

The above letter reached Joy the day after her talk with Sir Godfrey, and it came as a great relief both to its recipient and to Lady Martindale, who were at their wits' end to account to the sick man for Violet's prolonged absence, and who were, moreover, consumed with anxiety as to the safety of the girl herself.

"Why does she make so much mystery about her address?" Gertrude said irritably, when Joy handed her the letter. 'If she wanted to go away, none of us would have prevented her going—in fact, how could noe prevent her? She is entirely her own mistress. But why all this mystery?"

Joy felt tongue-tied. She was very well able to guess at the solution of what puzzled Lady Martindale, yet she felt that it would not be fair to explain her surmises to anyone else, even though the surmises amounted to certainties.

"Now that Sir Godfrey is so much better," she said gently, "surely Violet will come back. I will write to-day and tell her he is on the high road to being quite well; then I am sure she will come back."

Joy's conclusions were right. Her briefly worded note, conveying the information that the invalid was quite convalescent and adding that his assailant had not been discovered, and that Sir Godfrey would in no case prosecute, brought a reply by return of post from Violet, saying that she would be home by the end of the week, and she was sorry she had been so stupidly afraid of illness as to run away to London.

"I've always been a perfect silly about illness"—so her words ran—"but I shall be awfully glad to get home. I don't like London as much as I used to."

Joy thought Violet certainly did not look as if London had suited her during the fortnight of her stay there, for she came back with a white, tired face, with deep shadows under the eyes, and a drawn look round her mouth made her look altogether a much older and quieter Violet. She was very subdued in manner, and Joy noticed that she was easily startled, that the least sound made her jump nervously, that she was oddly restless at one moment, apathetic and languid the next. She had a curious way, too of watching Joy—a certain furtiveness in her glance which puzzled the other girl—and she seemed to prefer Lady Martindale's society to being alone with the companion of her own age and choice. After a few days it began to dawn slowly upon Joy that Violet was afraid of her, and that whenever possible avoided a tete-a-tete with her. To Sir Godfrey she was almost like her old self—almost, but not quite, for with him, too, she showed a certain nervous embarrassment, and she shrank from being left alone with him.

He was allowed now to be in the drawing-room for the greater part of the day, and Joy, looking on as the little drama in which she herself played only a subordinate part, often thought that his eyes, wistfully though they were sometimes fixed on Violet's lovely face, were trying also to penetrate the girl's mind, and to understand what lay beneath her surface loveliness.

"Her beauty doesn't blind him any more," Joy meditated shrewdly. The little country-bred girl had a rare fund of shrewdness, partly, perhaps, inherited, partly imbibed from Miss Rachel, who, with all her simplicity, had a large store of worldly wisdom. "Her beauty doesn't blind him, and he knows something he didn't know before," so Joy's thoughts ran on, whilst she sat in the broad window seat of the drawing-room, her work in her hand, Violet's hurried exclamation still sounding in her ears.

"Don't ever leave me alone with Cousin Godfrey. I—sick people make me feel nervous." But there came an afternoon when Violet was no longer able to fend off that tete-a-tete with her cousin against which she had so long struggled—an afternoon when, as she and Joy entered the drawing-room together, Godfrey laid down the book he was reading, and said quietly—

"I want to have a little talk with Violet, Miss Sterne. I am sure you won't think me rude if I ask you to leave us alone till tea time?"

He smiled at Joy as he spoke. The girl and he had become good friends in the past few weeks; he liked her sunny face and the happy nature which showed itself in making happiness for others. His smile was very kindly, but there was a ring of decision in his voice, and Joy knew that he did not intend to be opposed in his wish. Violet, though she shrank back a little, knew it too, and realizing that the hour she had been fighting off had come, she advanced towards Godfrey's corner by the fireplace and laughed lightly. The laugh was forced, but the sunlight that fell across her lovely face and graceful form turned her into such an exquisite picture that for a moment the man who lay watching her forgot his purpose, and drew in his breath sharply. With all his capability and common-sense, Godfrey Martindale was, after all, a man, and a very human man at that; and Violet's loveliness made an appeal to the senses which he found it difficult to resist.

"You're ever so much better, Cousin Godfrey, aren't you?" she said, in the soft, well-modulated voice she was painfully learning to adopt; "you'll get out soon, the doctor says." She sat down in a low chair by the fire, her pretty eyes looking at him with a certain shy shrinking, which greatly enhanced her attractiveness. Godfrey experienced a sudden remorse. She looked so slight, so butterfly a thing, the color came and went so delicately in her face—that half-frightened expression in her eyes made her seem so much less of a woman than a lovely child—that he wondered with compunction whether it was quite fair to say to her what he wished to say.

"Joy and I are planning to take you for a drive when Doctor Giles gives leave. The country now is beautiful."

Violet was talking fast. The most unobservant of listeners must have noticed that she was talking at random and against time, and that for some reason she was afraid of the quiet man on the sofa. That flurry in her speech turned the scales of Godfrey's compunction against her; and although, when he began to speak, his voice was very gentle, he spoke with a firmness that did not intend to be gainsaid.

"I did not ask you to come and talk to me just that we might discuss future drives, Violet," he said. "I have something to say to you—something to ask you." His grave tones drove the color from Violet's cheeks. She looked away from him, and half rose, the impulse of flight strong upon her.

"No, don't run away." Sir Godfrey put out his hand and touched her shoulder. "We must have this talk, Violet. We have already evaded it long enough."

The girl sat back in her chair, as though resigned to her fate; but for a second her frightened eyes lifted themselves to his face; he saw that her lips trembled.

"Poor little girl," he said, his natural tenderness towards everything weaker than himself overcoming a certain hardness in his manner, of which Violet had been conscious ever since her return; "don't look so frightened, my dear child. I won't hurt you; but I want to have a clear understanding about—something that puzzles me."

"Ye-es," Violet faltered, twisting her fingers together with a fresh access of nervousness, "something that—that puzzles you?" she repeated after him.

"Yes"—he looked at her keenly, and leant a little towards her from his couch—"I konw who it was that knocked me down six weeks ago, and—I know why he did it."

"Oh!" came in a sudden terrified cry from Violet, and she cowered down in her chair, looking more than ever like some frightened child, her eyes very big and blue, her lips trembling afresh.

"Yes," Godfrey repeated deliberately, "I know why he did it—at least, I know why he says he did it, and I want to ask you to tell me the real truth."

"The — real — truth?" Violet whispered. "But what—who——"

"Let us be honest with one another," Godfrey interposed quietly. "Whilst I was ill I thought a good deal about the evening of my—accident, and I want to try and get at the facts. I want to know whether—Mr. Jem Stibbard was telling me the truth, or merely bluffing?"

A faint gleam of hope flashed into Violet's eyes; a way of escape seemed to be opening before her. She raised her hand with a more assured air.

"I was walking home on that February afternoon," Godfrey went on, "and I had just reached the bend in the lane beyond what your little friend Joy calls 'the great view,' when a man came up to me. He looked flushed and angry; he was obviously almost beside himself with rage and jealousy, and he poured out a torrent of words, the gist of which I did not at first grasp. Then, all at once, it struck me that he was talking about you, and—perhaps I got angry too, for in the references he made to you he was very insolent and familiar. He said"—Godfrey's eyes never left Violet's down-cast face—"he said that you belonged to him, that you had promised to marry him, and that you were playing fast and loose with—him and with—me."

Violet lifted her head, her eyes, shining with tears, looked full into her cousin's face; their glance was one of hurt innocence.

"Oh! but—that isn't true," she said with a little sob. "I—I've not done right, I know I haven't—perhaps I ought to have given up all my old friends when I came here. But Jem and me—I mean Jem and I — we'd always been friends—like brother and sister—and it seemed unkind to give him up altogether just because I was richer than him." In her excitement her grammar became of more and more doubtful quality, but Godfrey, looking at her flushed face and innocent eyes, forgot to notice her grammatical errors.

"I should not want to ask you to give up old friends," he said; "but Mr. Stibbard told me you were more than friends. He said that you and he were bound to one another; that you were his promised wife. He vowed that I had come between you, and, when I walked away, refusing to hear more, he gave me a blow that nearly cost me my life."

"Oh! don't—don't!" Violet cried, covering her face with her hands and slipping from her chair to kneel beside his couch. "I can't bear it if you talk like that—if you look at me so crossly. I—Jem was wrong—he was wrong!" The words poured from her in a torrent of passionate vehemence. "He'd no business to have come down here—he'd no business to—to tell you lies."

Her voice faltered, but she lifted her head and looked at Godfrey. Tears were in her eyes, tears were on her lovely, flushed face; she did not flinch under his gaze; her hands went out tremblingly and touched his hand. Once more all his doubts vanished, lulled by her beauty and by the innocence of her eyes, and drawing her close to him, he kissed her. His kiss seemed to affect her in a strange and wholly unexpected way: she shrank back from him, her eyes wide and terrified, the color fading from her cheek.

"You—mustn't do that!" she stammered. "I oughtn't to let you—I mean—oh! I don't know what to do—I don't know what to do!" and before Godfrey could stretch out a hand to detain her, before he could even speak to her again, she had struggled to her feet and fled, sobbing, from the room, leaving a sorely puzzled and distracted man behind her.

"She can't have thought I was playing with her"—so his thoughts ran as he lay pondering over the interview—"she must have known that the very fact of my kissing her meant—well meant everything. I was going to ask her to be my wife, poor little girl! I could protect her then from these old friends of hers. Did I frighten her? Was I too sudden? What does it mean?"

Gertrude found rather a fractious and absentminded Godfrey when she came into the drawing-room at tea time. He was evidently disinclined for conversation, and his distrait manner surprised her no less than Violet's non-appearance surprised and disconcerted Joy. What, the girl wondered, had taken place between the two after she left them alone together? How much had Sir Godfrey said to Violet? How much of the truth did he himself know? And if he knew any of it, had he divulged it to Violet? Could they have quarrelled? That something serious had happened was sufficiently evident both to Lady Martindale and to Joy, for all the rest of that day and all the next Violet stayed in her room, pleading a violent headache as an excuse. On the day after that, Sir Godfrey insisted upon being driven home to Hosday Hall, declaring that he had already trespassed for too long upon the hospitality of Standon Towers. Violet avoided seeing him again until the very moment of his departure, when with the rest of the party she stood in the hall to watch him go. There was no opportunity for any private conversation, only, as Godfrey wrung her hand in farewell, he stopped a little towards her and whispered:

"I shall come over soon to ask you another question," and when she shrank back and blushed vividly, he told himself, dear deluded man, that all that had puzzled him was due to her sweet maiden modesty, and that he had been totally misjudging her.

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(To be continued.

NIAGARA DISTRICT NEEDS PROTECTION.

Enough Peaches in Georgia Alone to Supply America.

The relationship between Canada and the United States as regards the fruit industry, and the manifest need of a Protective tariff for Canadian fruit growers have been clearly shown in a series of articles by Dr. George Charles Buchanan of Beamsville, Ont., President of the Ontario and Western Co-operative Society. Dealing with the Niagara peninsula Dr. Buchanan says:—

There are in the Niagara Peninsula about 350 square miles of land on which fruit can be well grown, not counting such districts as Ancaster and Dundas. Between Toronto and Hamilton there is another 100 square miles; in all at least 288,000 acres.

Not all of this is peach land, not even probably 20 per cent. of it. But very little of it is of no use for any fruit. Much can be made fine peach land by drainage, or good apple, plum or grape land; some is only good for berries, but all of it is in a good fruit climate. The unplanted land is waiting to double or quadruple in value, whenever the market demands more fruit.

It may be assumed that the value of this land for general farming is not over $100 per acre, and that for fruit purposes it is worth $500 per acre; although much of the peach land is worth $1,000 per acre; and that where it has to be drained, draining will average about $20 per acre.

It can further be stated that peach land at $1,000 per acre is known to pay a good return on the investment in the hands of practical growers. If we take the very low estimate of 10,000 acres planted at $500 per acre we have a value of $50 000,000 for the orchard and berry lands.

Now as our home market grows, and in our home market we have no competition, every acre of this 288,000 has potentially the same value, and fully half is unplanted.

There are in Canada about 8,000,000 people, the United States claim 93,000,000. However that may be, our present soft fruit acreage is fully equal to supplying Canada. It is safe to say there is not over 12,000 acres of peaches in Eastern Canada. If this supplies 8,000,000 people it would take 150,000 acres to supply 93,000,000 people, but there are 180,000 acres of peaches in Georgia alone.

A FINE MEMORY.

Blinks, after inviting to dinner his friend Jinks, who had just returned from abroad, was telling him what a fine memory his little son Bobby had.

"And do you suppose he will remember me?" said Jinks.

"Remember you? Why, he remembers every face that he ever saw."

An hour later they entered the house, and, after Jinks had shaken hands with Mrs. Blinks, he called Bobby over to him.

"And do you remember me, my little man?"

"Course I do. You're the same fellow that dad brought last summer, and ma was so cross about it that she didn't speak to him for a whole week."

Mother—"Why did you let Harry kiss you?" Edith—"Oh, he was so pressing, and——" Mother—"That's no excuse. You must learn to say 'No!' my child." Edith—"That's just what I did say, mother. He asked me if I would be angry if he kissed me."

When wet boots are taken off fill them quite full with dry oats. This grain has a great fondness for damp, and will rapidly absorb the last vestige of it from wet leather.

A new and delicious dish is to get the smallest possible onions, boil them, peel till they are no larger than your thumb and mix them with French peas cooked with a little cream.