

# A SEVERE TRIAL;

OR, THE MEMORY OF A BOY WITH DARK EYES.

## CHAPTER II.—(Cont'd)

"Well, you astonished her. She never says much—except to criticize, and she's bitter enough then—but I could see that your singing of that delicious 'Serenade' took her by surprise. And Herr von Konig put on his spectacles to look at you, Allie, it's the greatest bit in the world that you are a woman of independent means! You'd make a fortune on the stage!"

"I wish Aunt Rosa could hear you!"

"I am sure Madame Cronhelm thinks you mean to sing in public."

"Madame Cronhelm is at liberty to think her own thoughts."

"Do they know you have such a voice down at the vicarage?"

"I sing in church," I say demurely.

"I never knew such a queer girl as you are, Allie. If you were anybody else, you would be—"

"I wouldn't be Allie Somers Scott," I laugh, shrugging my shoulders.

"I suppose not. And I like you just as you are, my dear. Have you seen the latest addition to Poppy's trousseau?"

A Louis XVI. morning-dress of ruby plush with pink bows—we must make her put it on after luncheon. It is most becoming to Poppy, though, you know, I think it is a ridiculous style for the morning—fancy crimson plush with pink surah bows."

Poppy Deane is a tall dark girl, with a marble-white complexion and black eyes. Olive is quite different. She has plump cheeks with a round face, a pink and white complexion, very fair hair in a wisp of curls over her forehead, and a pair of very saucy, if not particularly handsome eyes. Today she wears a "granny" bonnet lined with cardinal and a coquetish dress of navy-blue and garnet. It shows off her prettily rounded figure. Also she wears spectacles, and so much because she finds them necessary to aid her sight as because she fancies they improve the appearance of what she considers the worst features in her face.

"That serenade of Gounod's rings in my ears," she says, as we reach the door of the house in Dexter Square. "You must sing it again for me, Allie, after we have criticised Poppy's plush gown."

## CHAPTER III.

It is Friday evening—the evening of the Rolleston's dance.

I have heard and seen nothing of "the Count" since yesterday; nobody has mentioned him. Whether he is in the house or not I know not, nor whether he has been in since I changed his dead camellia for my bunch of purple Woodhay violets yesterday. I have been fully occupied between my stinging lessons and visits to Dexter Square—so fully that such a person as Mrs. Wauchope's handsome ill-tempered lodger could certainly find no room in my thoughts. If I am thinking of any one now, it is of a little fair man, and of a comfortable hammock-chair with its cushioned shoes on the fender, it is of Gussie Deane. Poor Gus is devoted to me—has been devoted to me since we were children. And Gus is not a bad-looking fellow by any means. He is a little fair man, and I do not like little fair men as a rule. But then he is a captain in the "Blues," and I believe he really likes me. I do not care for him, of course; but it is fun to have a lover. I have had a good many lovers—so at least they tell me. I have up to this time walked "in maiden meditation, fancy free." I am not a flirt—my worst enemy—if I have any enemies—could not accuse me of flirting. It is an amusement which I both dislike and despise. And I have never loved Gus, though he is and has always been my "chum." He does not care to be called my chum now so much as he used. Olive says it is because he thinks "sweetheart" a prettier word than "chum" is about sweethearts. I shall never be so foolish as to fall in love with any one. I think love is all nonsense. And most of the men who have wanted to marry me—I do not mean Gus, of course; and besides, he never asked me to marry him—were in love with Woodhay and not with Allie Scott. If I had had no money I might believe in love—a little; but, as it is, I do not believe in it at all.

"Shall I light the candles on your dressing-table, ma'am?"

Mary Anne's voice wakes me out of what was perhaps as much a dream as a reverie.

"What o'clock is it?" I ask, yawning.

"It is half-past seven, ma'am. Is this your dress?" I'll unpack it for you and lay it on the bed."

The back drawing-room is my bedroom. I leave my easy chair reluctantly—it is a cold night even for March, sharp and frosty—and I step into my room to the inner room, where a newly-lighted fire burns in the grate.

"Why didn't you light that before?" I ask, shivering.

"The Count—he came in unexpectedly, wanting his dinner. Mary Anne answers, kneeling down to put some life into the fire by means of a rapid fanning with her apron, and I had to attend to him. He's just like that—always—walking in when he's least expected. Gentlemen are a bother—you never know when they'll be in and when they won't!"

I take out my dress from its flat paste-board box myself, unwilling to trust it to the tender mercies of Mary Anne's grubby fingers. There is a note from Aunt Rosa in the box, and another bunch of my dear Woodhay violets. Aunt Rosa tells me no news—they are all well at Yattendon, and have had very cold weather. I lay down her note and take up the violet's thing, as I press my dewy fragrant purple blossoms to my lips, of the dear old trees at Woodhay about whose mossy roots they grew.

"Send Mrs. Wauchope up to me," I say to the maid-of-all-work, when she has done what she can for my sulky fire.

Mrs. Wauchope will make a better attempt at getting me into my dress than she could, and will not perhaps leave such traces of the strain she must necessarily put upon my sky-blue face. I have arranged my hair in its usual simple fashion before my landy comes up, gathered closely round my head into a loop of close plaits at the back, and curling in a light natural fringe about my forehead. And before the Deanes' carriage comes for me I am ready, standing before the dingy old-fashioned glass and wondering what Olive will think of me and of my dress.

What I see in the glass is a tall girl, in a long closely-fitting cuirass body of blue silk, ending in a shabby crepe of the same color, and with a billowy blue skirt lying along the carpet like the crisping waves of a summer sea—a girl with a pretty white neck and arms, with hair neither fair nor dark, but a curious ash color, with eyes neither blue nor gray, but a mixture of both, with a nose neither long nor short, a mouth neither large nor small—a face that denies all laws of beauty, yet a face which Olive says she would never be tired of looking at—but then Olive is my friend, and prejudiced; I do not set much store by her verdict. What I know myself to be is a girl with a swaying gait and a well-poised head, whose outdoor life has developed muscle and straight limbs, and whose oddly enough has a pair of eyes which have not looked out of the family face since my great-grandmother died, about a hundred years ago.

While I consider myself, gravely and dispassionately, as though I had discovered Mrs. Wauchope's depressing greenish-tinted mirror were another person, I hear the Count's voice upstairs, talking to my landlady. My heart beats quicker for a moment. Can he have discovered the theft of the dead "button-hole"? But no; he goes in and shuts the door. Mrs. Wauchope comes down-stairs, passes my door, and I breathe freely again. I gather up my gloves and fan, having put my violets nesting near my head, and only spot of darker color in my skyey dress, and walking into the drawing-room, impelled by I know not what spirit of mischief or of folly, I sit down at the piano, and begin to sing "the voice is near." I do not think my voice is audible in the attic; I feel sure the words are not distinguishable; and, even if they were, who could tell what silly freak led me to sing them?

"Word after word I seem to hear. Yet strange seems to me That, though I listen to thy voice, Thy face I never see!"

"Why Allie my dear, you're far the nicest girl in the room!" This remark is Olive's, of course.

"So I have been telling her," says Gus, who has been my partner in the waltz which has just come to an end.

"Don't talk nonsense! Who is that gentleman who has just come into the room?"

We are standing near a doorway. Gus and Olive both turn their heads.

"Which gentleman?" Olive asks, blinking through her spectacles.

"Oh, he has moved on now—you can't see him with the crowd!"

"Why did you ask?" Gus says. "Was there anything remarkable about him?"

"He was remarkably handsome, that was all."

"Oh!" says Gus, screwing his glass into his eye.

"I know everybody here," Olive remarks, looking round the room. "If you see him again when I am in your neighborhood point him out to me, and I am almost sure to know who he is. Allie, you look jolly; I hope you are enjoying yourself as much as you seem to be doing."

"Oh, quite as much!"

"I am having such fun with him," Olive says, glancing after her late partner, with a world of mischief in her saucy dimpled face. "He is so silly—you no idea what a donkey he makes of himself."

"You'd better not make a donkey of yourself," Gus remarks severely.

"Oh, he doesn't know I'm laughing at him! Men are so vain, they would think anything sooner than that you were making fun of them."

"You know a lot about them!" says Gus, with a glance of brotherly scorn directed downward at his pretty little sister.

"I know enough to know that. Here is Captain Cathart coming for me. And there is the 'Weit-von-Dir.' Oh, Allie, don't waste a note of that delicious waltz!"

Ten minutes later, I am in Olive's neighborhood again, this time waiting for Fred to bring me my hat.

"There is the man I mean, Olive—standing with his back to the wall—the tall dark one, talking to Colonel Rolleston."

"Yes; I observed him just now. I thought I knew everybody here; but I do not know who he is, nor does Captain Cathart. Isn't he splendidly handsome, Allie? I don't think I ever saw such a handsome face in my life."

"He is very handsome," I answer, glancing at the grand-looking boy—for he nearly seems more than a partner, and stands talking to Colonel Rolleston, and looking with splendid careless eyes about the room. His face is dark, almost foreign-looking, with a straight nose, a slight dark mustache, and a pair of the most beautiful, fierce, tender, laughing, long-lashed eyes I have ever seen.

"I shall get Katie Rolleston to tell me his name," Olive promises, as her partner whirls her away; and Fred returning with my ice, that and the waltz put everything else out of my head.

It is nearly half an hour later when somebody introduces me to a partner for the coming waltz whose name I do not catch; and, looking round carelessly still talking to young Rolleston, I find the unknown standing before me with his eyes fixed inquiringly on my face.

I accept him, of course, and walk away with him, wishing I had caught his name. He is a rather silent partner, and I am more anxious to study me than to make myself agreeable, but whatever he does say is clever and amusing, and so boyish withal that it is absolutely refreshing after the "society" talk to which I have been compelled to listen for the last two hours. He dances well, and knows how to take care of his partner. Once, when somebody by accident puts his foot on my dress, he turns round with a wicked flash of the eye which brings Mrs. Wauchope's ill-tempered lodger into my mind. And once or twice I find him looking at me with an expression which puzzles me a little. It is not admiration, nor criticism, nor depreciation; but it is easier to say what it is not than what it is—rather a mixture of amusement and curiosity, as if trying to read some riddle in my face.

When the waltz is over, he resigns me to Gus, having just put down his name opposite to the only disengaged dance on my programme, a mazourka. I can make

nothing of the hieroglyphic scrawled in pencil; but I fancy the last letter of the initials looks like "B."

"Is that your handsome man?" Gus asks, looking after him as he makes his way slowly through the crowd.

"Yes," I answer at once. "Do you know his name?"

"Don't you know it?"

"No! I could not catch it when he was introduced to me."

"Why, that is Baxter—Gerard Baxter, the painter, a clever fellow, but no 'stay' in him. If he had, he would have made a name for himself long ago."

"He looks a mere boy."

"He is one-and-twenty. He could paint pictures if he liked; but he won't take the trouble. Jack Rolleston knows him well; but I've only met him once or twice. He has been away in Scotland the last month or two, sketching. I don't consider him so very handsome."

I think Gus is a little jealous, or I would think so if I had time to think of anything but my own astonishment. So this is Mrs. Wauchope's lodger; this is the Count; this is the whilom glazier, the man who christened Gus's baby! It is strange, it is astonishing, it is not to be believed! The episode of the violets rushes to my recollection—the words I had so impudently sung this very evening—sung to him! It is well for me that he has no idea who I am—would never dream of identifying me with Mrs. Wauchope's spinster tenant "of a certain age." Aunt Rosa would have good reason to be ashamed of me if she knew what pranks I have been playing—good reason to say that she was right and I was wrong in the advisability of my coming up alone to Carleton Street! I shall never be so foolish again. I ought to have had more sense—a girl of very nearly one-and-twenty! It has been a lesson to me not to be carried away by the wild spirits which have been my bane always, the love of adventure which my good aunt has so often tried to nip in the bud! If I had known that Mrs. Wauchope's "four-pair-back" was a person like this, I should not have been so very nervous; my laggard sense of propriety now stigmatizes as a silly practical joke, all the more silly because the victim would never know who perpetrated it. Standing with Gus near the upper end of the room, I wish devoutly that I had not promised him a second dance. What if I should be foolish enough to betray my identity with Mrs. Wauchope's "drawing-room"? What if he should ask me where I am staying in London? I shall be very cool to him, very reserved and distant, so that the idea of asking such a question shall never enter into his head. I am sorry now that I got myself into this scrape—I should like to have known my fellow-lodger who is so poor and so proud. But I have made any further acquaintance with him impossible, all through that wretched little bunch of violets!

I avoid his look for the rest of the evening, though more than once I am conscious that he is quietly studying me. Gus seems rather annoyed at my absence of mind. Once or twice he has offered me a penny for thoughts which I certainly would not have communicated to him for a great many pounds. Retribution has been done in the form of the heels of my offense; but I hope the lesson will be a salutary one, and congratulate myself that no worse mischief has befallen me.

The dance I have begun to dread has come to its end. I have been engaged to Mr. Baxter. He comes up at the first notes of the mazourka.

"This is ours, I think?"

"I take his arm; and, as I take it, my heart gives a sudden bound of dismay. I have not seen him since the evening coat he wears a bunch of half-withered violets!"

"This has been a pleasant evening," he says, when we have taken a couple of circuits of the room.

"I answer vaguely, my heart beating fast."

"Small dances like this are much more enjoyable than gigantic crushes—don't you think so?"

"After the first glance at the violets, I do not dare to look at them. Any one might wear violets—almost every one wears violets in March. But these are my violets—I know it intuitively, though they should care to wear them, having no idea that they give puzzles away. The violets were put where I found them—in jest, and I have worn them in earnest. I had no right to do it; and, if you will return them to

the owner, I will expiate my fault by giving them up to you."

"On the contrary," he answers quickly. "I know she did it out of mere thoughtless kindness—perhaps mixed with a spice of mischief. And she thought I would never know—I am very sure she intended that I never should!"

There are tears of mortification in my eyes that I should have lowered myself by doing this foolish thing. How I hate those miserable violets, how I wish they had withered among their native ferns and mosses under the elms and chestnuts at Woodhay, before they tempted me to make such a fool of myself!

"You seem to take it to heart," Mr. Baxter says, looking down at me. "I suppose I look very cross and disagreeable. I am sorry I told you anything about it. Do you care to try the mazourka again?"

"No thank you. I do not care to dance any more."

"Miss Scott," he says, standing before me, and speaking gravely enough now. "I must ask you to forgive me. I am ashamed of myself for having spoken of what I should have kept secret—of what I ought to have taken for just as much as it was worth. The violets were put where I found them—in jest, and I have worn them in earnest. I had no right to do it; and, if you will return them to

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