

A SEVERE TRIAL;

OR, THE MEMORY OF A BOY WITH DARK EYES.

(CHAPTER III.—(Cont'd))

"If she can forgive herself, she may very well extend her forgiveness to you," I answer, gathering up my billowy train in my hand as I stand beside him, looking very tall and slim and dignified outwardly, but within feeling several degrees smaller than I have ever felt in my life before. "For my part, I do not see how she can ever forgive herself."

"She need not blame herself," he says, looking down at me from his superior height with a smile which displeases me by reason of its undisguised amusement. "I do not suppose she blames herself very much, I return deliberately, with the careless insolence with which I think to recover my own conceit. "It would be different, you know, if you were—"

"Anything but a poor landscape painter," he interrupts, at no loss to comprehend my insistent pause. "She would never have dared to do it if she had thought him her equal. She would never have ventured to do it if she had dreamed of his thrusting himself into the same society which she frequents."

"His dark eyes have blazed up quite suddenly, I had not thought they could change like that. "Probably not, though I think she was more to blame for that than for her answer, with a slight, almost imperceptible movement of the shoulders. "I think so. I would rather take a liberty with an equal than with an inferior myself. I never accused you! but with an indescribable infection of voice which enrages me."

"It was a liberty," I acquiesce, with cheeks which have deepened into crimson again. "You are right when you call it a liberty. It was a most unpardonable liberty."

"I did not say so. I merely said that I should not presume on difference of rank to play a trick upon another person—that was who the trick was on."

"I played no trick upon you!" I exclaim indignantly. "You!" he repeats, his face changing suddenly back from angry storm to amusement. "I never accused you! I was only talking of another person!"

"Oh, yes, of another person!" I agree, moving away with the insolently disdainful air which had infuriated him. "Of a person who ought to regret bitterly that she so far forgot herself as to put it into your power to insult her."

He is holding the bunch of violets still in his hand. As I turn away, he lets them fall, and sets his heel upon them, grinding them as if you were quarreling like anything just now."

"I wonder Mrs. Rolleston cares to ask such people to her house, Olive. I don't think that man has the smallest pretensions to be called a gentleman."

Olive laughs, looking at me. "Ah, I see you have quarreled!" she says shaking her head. "Allie, I'm afraid you are going to fall in love with Mr. Gerard Baxter."

For two days, even to myself, I ignore the existence of Mr. Gerard Baxter. I never mention his name to either Mrs. Wauchope or Mary Anne, nor do they mention his name to me. I fancy he is in the house—I fancy I hear his knock at the door sometimes; but I never look out—I never listen for the sound of his voice. I practice a great deal, having promised Madame Cronhelm to sing at her concert, and Olive has lent me "Probation," so that I do not find time hang heavily on my hands. I spend the mornings at Madame Cronhelm's, and very often lunch with the Deanes, only coming back to Carleton Street at about four o'clock in the afternoon. It is cold, disagreeable weather, with an east wind which reddens one's nose and eyelids and makes my fire and hammock-chair very pleasant in the evenings, which would be getting shorter every day now, if I did not pull down the blinds early, and shut out the dull March twilight, which is so cheerless and so long.

One afternoon—the third since the Rollestons' dance—I hear a knock at the door, which I feel sure is Olive's knock; and, having promised not to keep her waiting if she called for me, I run down stairs to meet her in the hall. But, instead of Olive in her blue and cardinal dress, I come rather violently against a young man in a dark frock and top hat, who stands back to let me pass, pulling off his hat as he endeavors to place himself as flatly as possible against the wall. I recognize him in a moment, as I have no doubt he recognizes me. But I brush

by him brusquely, without looking up. Before I have passed him, I remark having so far forgotten myself, whatever his offense; but when I glance up, he is looking straight at me, ignoring me as utterly as if I were the plaster figure of a boy with a basket on his head which stands before the window with the painted blind of the landing. The whole incident does not occur until I am conscious that it has happened. But it leaves an uncomfortable impression on my mind, which I cannot shake off.

I walk along the sunny road of the gloomy old brown-brick street, looking out for Olive, whom I hope to meet before I reach the corner; but all the time I am wondering whether Mr. Gerard Baxter "cut" me, or whether I might be supposed to have administered that process to him. I have acted with impudently rudeness, no doubt; but, if I had bowed to him, would he have dared to pretend not to see? Long after I meet Olive Deane the question annoys me—it follows me into Madame Cronhelm's room. For the first time my music-lesson bores me; Herr von Konig's illustrations of the weird melodious music of "Faust," as compared with the silver-sweet cadences of Rossini, interest me; and Madame Cronhelm accuses me rather sharply once or twice of singing out of tune. It is not till I find myself in the great untidy drawing-room at Dexter Square, looking at Poppy's latest wadding present, that the uncomfortable feeling of having acted untruly to myself begins to wear away. I exorcise it chiefly by a resolution not to treat Mr. Baxter, should I ever meet him, as if he were the "village maiden" with whose fancy for a landscape-painter Olive is always taunting me.

This evening, while I am at dinner, Mrs. Wauchope comes in to ask me how I liked a pudding she made for me, and I used to be used to her coming long ago at Woodhay, when I was a child. From the pudding our conversation wanders away to other matters—the dearth of everything in London, how she manages in the way of catering for her lodgers.

"I do the best I can for them," she says, "especially for the poor young man upstairs. Another person might not trouble her head as to whether she should be as tough or not; but I take just as much trouble about his meals as I do about your own. I'm not one to neglect a lodger because he cannot afford grand joints. Many a time I've gone out for my way to get chop or cutlet cheaper for him, though he'd never know it—ay, and added a bit of my own to it too. In a house like this, where there is so much going, nobody would miss a couple of slices of butter."

Is he perchance fed from the joint that left my table, this proud young man who had dared to tell me that I had taken a liberty in presenting him with a bunch of violets? I thought of this as I ate my sure-fills me with a little, small, womanly triumph of which a man would have felt ashamed.

"I know he's hard up sometimes, poor lad!" I say to myself. "He wouldn't say so to save his life, but we landlords know more than people think. And somehow I feel more for the proud distant ones, that wouldn't tell you their troubles if they were starving, than for them that makes a poor mouth about themselves, and is always down on their luck."

Had I dared to insult him, and he so poor as this? My mind misgives me, having brushed by him so cavalierly this morning on the stairs, for having spoken to him so rudely the other night in Berkeley Street. He must have cared for those unfortunate violets, or he would never have worn them half a year ago. He would not say so to save his life, but we landlords know more than people think. And somehow I feel more for the proud distant ones, that wouldn't tell you their troubles if they were starving, than for them that makes a poor mouth about themselves, and is always down on their luck."

But the next time I meet him he turns the tables upon me—supposing me to have been the aggressor in the first instance. I am coming into the house as he passes out, and he never so much as looks at me to see whether I mean to take any notice of him or not. So that he has himself virtually put an end to our acquaintance.

Of course I feel mortified, though he may possibly think it was my wish that we should ignore that introduction at the Rollestons'. But I know that was not my wish, and that I would have bowed to him this time if I had got the chance, and his looking in that determined way over my head makes me feel very angry. However, I do not see him again in Carleton Street or anywhere else for more than a week, and though Mrs. Wauchope tells me that he is more at home than he used to be, and forgets his rudeness to my own folly in busy preparations for Madame Cronhelm's concert, which is to take place on the evening of the twenty-first. I am to sing twice, first the "Jewel" song from "Faust," then Blumenthal's "Berg" of the River. The selection is Madame Cronhelm's; but both songs are old friends of mine and old favorites. Herr von Konig tells me I had better have an encore ready, unless I care to repeat the two; but I tell him laughingly that that would be a very unlucky thing to do, to prepare an encore beforehand.

On the day before the concert, Ellnor and Olive Deane call for me to go with them to the Rolleston—not to an "At Home" there but merely to pay a visit to the girls. They are to give a fancy ball early in April, and we amuse ourselves with portfolios of sketches of national and fancy-dresses, sitting in the great handsome room with its drawing-room, with its balconies darkened by flowering plants—five or six girls altogether, with two kindred spirits in the shape of Fred Deane and Crauford Rolleston, who are quite as good as the subject of ladies' dresses and gowns.

Katie and Crauford Rolleston and I are studying a colored print of an Alsatian together, and I am saying how pretty the black velvet can would look on the blonde head like the crown of the new hat. There but merely to pay a visit to the girls. They are to give a fancy ball early in April, and we amuse ourselves with portfolios of sketches of national and fancy-dresses, sitting in the great handsome room with its drawing-room, with its balconies darkened by flowering plants—five or six girls altogether, with two kindred spirits in the shape of Fred Deane and Crauford Rolleston, who are quite as good as the subject of ladies' dresses and gowns.

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"I am not much of a hand at figures," Mr. Baxter says, without any pause of surprise, or anger, or embarrassment, never put them into my pictures if I can help it, and, when I do, I leave them as much as possible to the imagination. But I dare say I might suggest some characters, and then you could find out the dress they must wear—or invent it."

"Oh, do," Katie exclaims, making room for him on the ottoman beside her, and not observing that he and I, whom she had seen dancing together, had taken no notice of each other. "That will be delightful; won't it, Allie?"

"Very," I say shortly, and turn to Crauford Rolleston, who however is listening to Mr. Baxter, and not to me. "We must take a lesson from the notable Hannah Woolly," he says, laughing, as he sinks into the place Katie has made for him. "Don't you remember what she says in her book, printed in 1681, and quoted by Charles Lamb—'Let all ingenious women have regard, when they work any image, to work it aright. First let it be drawn well, and then observe the directions which are given by knowing men. I do assure you I never worked any story, or single person, without informing myself both of the wages and habit, as followeth. If you work Jupiter, he must have long curled black hair, a purple garment trimmed with gold, and sitting upon a golden throne, with yellow clouds about him.'"

"How did she inform herself of that?" Katie laughs. "That's what always puzzled me," Gerard Baxter says gravely. "It is that which makes it all so delightful. Why don't you do the poets for characters—Maud Muller' for instance—"

"Maud Muller all the summer day Raked the meadow sweet with him?" So they chatter and laugh, while I turn over the sketches on my lap in sulky silence. Suddenly Katie goes to one end of the room for a book and Crauford and I are left alone on the great ottoman, with nothing but the space of one empty velvet triangle between us.

"Speak to me," he says suddenly, in a half-whisper, bending his head to look into my face. "Why won't you speak to me?" But I look at my pictures stubbornly, feeling that now it is my turn to make myself unpleasant—if I can. "You should send me to Coventry like this?"

Even if I had been inclined, I have no time to answer him. Katie has come back with a volume of Tennyson in her hand; Crauford with Dore's splendid "Dante," and in another moment they are all poring over the illustrations together, Katie's brown head very near Gerard Baxter's dark one, while Crauford takes up his old position close to me. I am thus in a manner forced into their consultation, and, though I am playing a role which suits me very ill, I cannot help being amused by it and laughing and suggesting with the rest.

"What a handsome friend is coming to Madame Cronhelm's concert?" Olive says, on our way back to Carleton Street. "How do you know?" I ask carelessly. "He said so just now. He is coming with the Rollestons. Do you know, fancy he is an admirer of Katie's—I saw their heads very close together over those prints of Dore's."

I do not like the suggestion; it vexes me all the evening while I practice my concert-music, while I sit in my chair over the fire, reading the latest dispatches from Woodhay and Yattendon, while I muse with my feet on the fender, and I am in a manner forced into their consultation, and, though I am playing a role which suits me very ill, I cannot help being amused by it and laughing and suggesting with the rest.

"Why turn away when I draw near? Why cold to-day? Once I was dear, Then thy heart stirred and flushed thy brow, Never a word welcomes me now. Speak to me—speak! Be my heart hard, Or will it break for one kind word; No word to bind, no pledge I seek, Only be kind. Speak to me—speak!"

I listen till the song is ended, and then I close the door softly and go back to the fire, laughing. I know at least of whom he is thinking; those were the very words he said to me this afternoon. "Speak to me. Why won't you speak to me?" The old spirit of mischief prompts me to get down to the piano and sing something that might seem like an answer; but the disastrous consequences of my former folly are too recent to encourage me to transgress a second time.

It is the evening of Madame Cronhelm's concert, which is indeed more of a conversation than a concert, the performers

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mixing among the audience when not actually required on the raised platform at the upper end of the room, where the grand piano and violins and violoncello are located, and a hum of talk filling up the intervals between the songs and concerted pieces. We all enjoy it, having so many friends among both performers and audience, and, though most of Madame Cronhelm's pupils take part in the choruses only, they are pleased to appear in public in any capacity—if so exclusive a reunion can be called public at all.

My "Jewel" song is among the first on the programme; and, when I have sung it, and when Herr von Konig has complimented me on what he is pleased to call the delicate grace of my vocalism, and called my voice "truly celestial," I make my way down to the Rollestons, whom I see grouped at a little distance from the blaze of light which makes a dazzling centre of the stage. But, before I can reach them, moving slowly through the dense crowd, with my long black satin skirt in one hand and my fan in the other, Gerard Baxter appears, and offers me his arm.

"Allow me to make way for you," he says, smiling, "and allow me to congratulate you on having brought down the house."

"Oh, don't you flatter me," I laugh, shrugging my shoulders. "Why do you emphasize the 'you'?" "Because it seems unnatural for you to pay compliments."

"I paid you a compliment once and you misunderstood it," he says more gravely. "Perhaps I may find some safer road to your favor than that. Have you forgiven me yet for my stupidity?"

"I am ready to forget all you do not wish me to remember," he rejoins at once. "And then, instead of finding myself nearer to the Rollestons, I find myself sitting on a chair near a cool bank of ferns and exotics with Mr. Baxter standing behind me, listening to a girl with a magnificent contralto voice singing the "Clang of the Wooden Shoon."

I listen like one in a dream. I know that he is there, standing near me in his sombre evening raiment, and that I am happy with a strange unaccountable sense of happiness, which I could not analyze even if I would. "Do you like her singing?" he asks, when the song is ended. "She has a very pure contralto voice. Her voice is better than her method of singing. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, I have heard people say that she is studying for the stage, that she is going to Italy to finish her musical education."

"So I have heard. I think she is quite right. Such a voice as hers was never meant to rust unburnished, not to shine in use."

"Or yours?" he questions a little wistfully. "They tell me you are studying for public exhibition too."

Who could have told him so? The idea amuses me so much that I do not immediately advise him to the contrary. "And if I am, I say, laughing, "do you think that am right in putting the talent which has been given me to some practical use?"

"If you have no other means of livelihood—yes." "You do not approve of singing on the stage?" "I do not care to think of your doing it."

"But one can do it, and yet—" "I hope you will never do it," he interrupts, with more passion than the occasion seems to warrant. "I hope to Heaven you will never do it!"

"But if I must do it?" I say, wiffully encouraging the idea which he somehow or other seems to have taken into his head. "If my daily bread depends upon it, what am I to do?"

"Can't you teach, or something?" he says boyishly. "You could teach other girls, couldn't you?" "But fancy teaching—fancy wearing one's self out with a troop of idle girls, as Madame Cronhelm does, when one might be bowing to a delighted audience behind the footlights, with ones arms full of bouquets."

"That's just what I hate," he retorts savagely. "That is just what no girl—no cousin or sister of mine—should ever degrade herself by doing. How do you think a man who loved you, for instance—would like to see other men level their opera glasses at you, and perhaps—indeed certainly—make comments on your personal appearance?"

"If they were complimentary, I don't suppose she would mind very much. Or but he would mind. If he were her brother or her husband, he would rather see her in her coffin than subject her to such degradation."

"How delightfully selfish!" I laugh, shrugging my shoulders. "Oh, we are all very selfish!" Mr. Baxter allows; and then, the overture to "Tannhauser" commencing, we find it impossible to talk any more for the present. (To be continued.)

Foolze—Dec Woolez wants ter sell his auter. Biff—What's the reason? Foolze—He figgers that the one that buys it will be a steady patient ever after.

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