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A SEVERE TRIAL;

OR, THE MEMORY OF A BOY WITH DARK EYES.

CHAPTER XII.—(Cont'd)

"Dear cousin, how shall I thank you?"

"By not thanking me at all, Rosalie." He stares out of the window, as if he had never seen lighted streets before, while I look at his grave profile and wonder if he thinks me a miserable spoilsport. I have spoiled his pleasant evening, at all events. I am sure he hates the idea of going to this low fourth or fifth rate theatre at the other side of this city.

"Do you think you will recognize her, Ronald?"

"I suppose I shall, from the description you have given me, and her photograph."

"I should recognize her among a thousand," I say, sighing. But Ronald is immovable, and I do not press the point.

"You say she has changed the color of her hair?"

"Yes—died it, I suppose. It will alter her appearance a good deal."

"So I should suppose."

The silence lasts till we reach Carleton Street.

"Take care of yourself in those outlandish places, Ronald," I say, with rather tardy concern, as he wishes me good-night.

"Do not be uneasy," he laughs carelessly. "I have come to too many cross roads not to be able to take care of myself."

"And when will you let me know?"

"Early to-morrow. You are going home to-morrow?"

"That must depend upon what you find out to-night."

"You must go home, Rosalie. I shall go down with you to Woodhay to-morrow."

"Very well. But you must first bring Gerard Baxter here to me."

He wishes a little, turning his head away. I look up at him as he stands in the dim light of the gas jet, buttoned up in his long light-colored coat, his hat in his hand. There is something very noble about this grave cousin of mine, something calm and cool and steadfast, which recommends him as a man of business, engaged as it is by other things.

"Good-night," he says coldly.

"Good-night," I echo, vaguely; and he is gone.

I hope I have not sent him into any danger. I hope he will not get into any row in that theatre to-night.

Half the night I lie awake, thinking of him and of Gerard Baxter, and of what the morrow may bring forth, my heart throbbing and my head in a whirl of suspense and dread of I know not what. A thousand nameless terrors and conjectures fit through my brain. What if my Baxter should escape us at this last moment! What if that child has outwitted me—put us on a wrong scent altogether? But over and above all is the glad triumphant consciousness, the hope that will not be put down, that to-morrow, through my instrumentality, Gerard Baxter may be free.

CHAPTER XIII.

"Well, Ronald?"

I have started up to meet him, the terrible suspense of the night and morning showing itself in my white face and shaking limbs.

"I have found her, Rosalie."

I cover my eyes with my hands in a passion of thankfulness.

"And Gerard Baxter?"

"This evening Gerard Baxter will be at liberty."

"He does not know it yet?"

"No—certainly."

I stand by the table, leaning my hand upon it, Ronald Scott opposite to me, watching my face with curious interest.

"Did you recognize her at once?"

"No, not at once. But I saw her afterward—coming out of the theatre; and then I recognized her."

"Did you speak to her then?"

"Yes."

"Was she frightened?"

"Not a bit, she was not."

"But did she intend to let him die, Ronald?"

"No. At least, she says so now."

"And you believe her?"

"She is nothing but a foolish, giddy child. I am only surprised that she was clever enough to baffle us all as she did. She intended to punish him, she said. She had suspected her of horrid things, and she meant to be even with him. She had never meant to let the trial come on—so she said. She pretended to know nothing about her husband at first—not even that he had been suspected of making away with her; but I soon let her see that she could not make a fool of me."

"And she allowed him to lie in prison all this time, knowing—"

"She seemed to think it rather a good joke," Ronald says, shrugging his shoulders. "I tell you she has scarcely any notion of right or wrong—she looks a mere child, and a more ignorant uneducated, utterly thoughtless child there could scarcely be. I never saw such hardness in my life—the idea of the body that was found having been identified as her body seems to have been the greatest source of amusement to her—she could not speak of it without laughing."

"Did her mother know?"

"She knows nothing about her mother. I believe she dislikes the woman excessively—and one can scarcely wonder at it."

"She is very pretty, is she not?" I ask, hesitatingly.

"She has a most beautiful face."

"You admire her?"

"No man can look at her without admiring her."

If I sigh, Ronald Scott does not hear me.

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"What will you do about Gerard Baxter?" I inquire, after a pause.

"I am going for the girl now, to take her before the authorities."

"If she should have run away, Ronald?"

"My dear Rosalie, you must think me a very simple person! I took care to put the house where she lodges under the surveillance of the police. But I do not think she has any intention of running away."

"Did she wonder how you discovered her?"

"She did not ask me any questions, and I volunteered no information; I think, myself, she was rather surprised that we had not found her before."

"Can she be punished in any way?"

"I think not. She is so young, you know; and she will say she knew nothing about her husband's detention in prison."

"Ronald," I ask, in the same hesitating way in which I had asked another question, "do you think she cares at all for him?"

"I am sure she does."

I do not know whether the answer pleases me or displeases me; but I put my hand to my heart.

"Go!" I exclaim hurriedly. "Don't lose any more precious time; and, when Gerard is at liberty, send him here to me."

Rosalie's face darkens; but he merely says—

"And you will allow me to take you down to Woodhay this evening, Rosalie?"

"When I have seen him."

He goes away then; and, for the next hour and a half, I walk up and down the room in a most extraordinary excitement. I cannot sit still—every sound startles me, every passing car draws me to the window, every voice down-stairs causes my heart to beat so tumultuously that I wonder how it can bear the strain. Twenty times I look at my watch—how slow the minutes drag—it is not one o'clock yet; and yet I feel that I have endured an eternity of suspense since Ronald Scott left the house at eleven. The cool, autumnal sunshine slants into the room, creeps across the colorless carpet, lies on the familiar pictures, on the faded table-cloth on the silver clasps of my fur cloak as it hangs over the back of a chair, on the dead dry grasses in the vases on the mantel piece. How weary I am of them all, how I hate the sight of them, and of my own glisty face in the glass! I see it every time I turn in my restless passing, and from white face, with dark shadows under the distended eyes, with contracted brows, with pale trembling lips that look as if they could never smile again. Can this haggard woman really be Allie Scott—the girl who used to laugh, sitting over the table with Olive Deane, who used to sing "In my Chateau of Pompernik" and "Nancy Lee" in such a gaily rollicking voice, who used to lounge in that hammock-chair, eating almonds and raisins and dreaming dreams of a boy upstairs painting away in a shabby velvet coat, who had thought it such a terrible thing to have been found out in the unsolicited gift of a bunch of violets? I can scarcely believe in my own identity when I look at that ghastly face which seems to grow more ghastly with every loud monotonous tick of the old clock on the landing, with every step that passes by the door—that passes and does not come in.

Another hour passes—two hours. Mrs. Wauchope comes up with my luncheon, and carries it away again untasted; a telegram arrives from London. God to say that the carriage has been sent to meet me; but the carriage may go back again, for I am late for that train already. I am beginning to feel that I cannot bear this terrible strain on brain and heart any longer when the door opens, quickly, is quickly closed again, and I turn round, to find Gerard Baxter standing just inside the room looking at me.

With a low exclamation, I hold out both my hands. He starts forward, and, seizing them, falls upon his knees at my feet.

For a moment neither of us speaks. He has buried his face in my dress and is sobbing heavily, while I hold both his hands in a close, hard grasp, shivering as if I had the ague.

"Gerard," I say at last—"Gerard."

Still he sobs on, like a heartbroken child who has wearied himself out with sobbing.

"Gerard, you are killing me. It is all over now, dear; you must not give way, for both our sakes!"

He raises his tear-swollen face—that face which seems to me but the ghost of its former self, so gaunt, so haggard as it is.

"You have saved my life—I would thank you for it, if I could speak; but I cannot speak!"

"Do not try to thank me, dear," I say, with stiff lips that almost refuse to form the words. "It was all my fault—I know it; but it is all over now."

He looks up at me with drooping eyes, with piteous lips that tremble like my own.

"And I do not care to live. It would have been better for me if I had died."

"But you must care to live. Why should you not care to live, Gerard? The world is before you—you are young; it is only cowards who wish to die!"

He makes no answer, but kneels there looking up at me, his cheeks wet with tears; and, though I speak so bravely, I myself am trembling exceedingly; my hands are as cold as ice, though my cheeks burn.

"You shall go to Italy, Gerard; you shall study in Rome and Florence; you shall make a name for yourself and do me credit—I who am your friend."

His haggard young face brightens a little, but only a very little.

"It could not be done. I am a beggar on the face of the earth, Allie—twice beggared now."

"But I am rich—you forget that!"

He shakes his head, with the old obstinate gesture.

"But listen. When you are a great artist, you shall pay me back—with interest, if you like."

He smiles faintly at that; we both smile, he looking up and I looking down.

"But that wretched child!" he says, at last.

"I will take care of her for you, Gerard."

"You!"

"Yes. She shall live with me at Woodhay while you are away."

"With you, Allie?"

"With me. And, when you have grown rich, you shall come for her—in two or three years, perhaps, if you work very hard."

He shudders, still kneeling beside me, still holding both my hands against his breast.

"Have you forgiven me, Allie?"

"Entirely. I wish I could as easily forgive myself."

He nods his head and kisses my hands passionately one after the other.

"How can you tell me to live—I who have lost the only thing worth living for in the world?"

Looking down into the boyish, careworn face, remembering all his love for me, all that he has suffered through that love, a great flood of pity surges through my heart.

"My poor boy," I say, smoothing the dark hair back from his forehead—"my poor boy!"

"Can you care for me still, Allie—a miserable wretch like me?"

"I shall care for you always, Gerard—always!"

"As you cared for me once, Allie?"

For a moment I hesitate, with the hungry hollow dark eyes devouring my face.

"As I might care for a dear brother, if I had one, Gerard."

He stands up, flinging away my hand.

"Is that all?"

"That must be all."

"And you can mete out your affection to such a wretch as that?"

"I hope so—with the help of Heaven!"

"I cannot!" he exclaims roughly. "I have not my feelings so admirably under control—I cannot love you like a lover one day, and like a brother the next!"

"We can never be anything but friends, Gerard; but I shall always be your friend—your best of friends."

"And I shall be your lover," he says passionately—"your lover, as long as I live."

"You may think so now," I answer quietly, but my heart rebels against the bitter fate that has divided us.

"I know it; and I glory in the knowledge. I love you with my whole heart and soul—and I shall never love any other woman. And now is it any wonder that I do not greatly care to live?"

"You must go away," I say, putting my hand to my forehead. "You must go away."

"My darling, I have wearied you—you look like a ghost!" he exclaims, with a penitence as passionate as his anger had been a moment before. "I will go away



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"I will do anything you ask me. Oh, my darling, my darling, you do not know the anguish it is to me to leave you this day!"

He has turned away from me; there is a look of utter misery in the gaunt young face, in the wild dark eyes. I am afraid of him—afraid that he will do some desperate thing, perhaps, in his despair.

"Gerard, if you love me, you will promise me to do what I ask you."

"If I love you, Allie?"

"You will go away—at once—to Italy—to Rome. You will start to-morrow—I will give you a check on my banker—to be repaid when you come back. Gerard, you have brought suffering upon me too—you owe it to me to make this reparation—it is all I ask of you—or will ever ask perhaps. And you owe it to your wife."

"Do not speak of her."

"But I must speak of her. The child loves you, Gerard."

"Yes, unless you prove yourself worthy of her love."

"I love her, Allie?"

"It is the only love that can rightly belong to you now. And it is a precious gift, Gerard—even the love of a child."

He turns away impatiently.

"Gerard, will you do this—for my sake?"

"If you asked me to lay down my life for you, Allie, I would do it."

"And will you go at once?"

"As soon as you like. I do not care what becomes of me."

"Dear Gerard, do not speak like that. It breaks my heart to hear you."

"My heart is broken," he says, letting his head sink upon his breast.

"I hope not," I answer, with a poor attempt at a smile. And then I fill in the check for him with a hand that shakes a good deal—a check for a hundred pounds. "You may write to me from Italy. And I will write to you—to tell you about your wife."

He kisses my hand passionately, looks at my face with eyes which seem as if they were trying to take away a memory which must last them through eternity, and then, without another word, he goes away.

"I will throw myself face downward on Mrs. Wauchope's drab moresen sofa and cry for two long hours—as if my heart would break."

We are rushing along through the darkness, my cousin Ronald Scott and I, as fast as the express train can carry us. Ronald is leaning back against the cushions opposite me, his tweed cap pulled well down over his eyes. I am sure he is not asleep, though he sits there so quietly; but I see his eyes in the shadow—the lamp over our heads gives such a miserable glimmer of light. We have been travelling for nearly two hours now—in another hour we shall have reached the nearest railway station to Yattenden, where the carriage from Woodhay will be waiting for us. We have scarcely ad-

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pressed each other during the whole of those two hours. Ronald does not seem inclined to talk, and I feel too wretched to do anything but brood over my misery, staring into the darkness with wide-open miserable eyes.

"Are you very tired, Rosalie?"

Rosalie's voice startles me, the silence between us has lasted so long.

"Rather. Why do you ask?"

"I thought you looked tired."

"Have you been studying my face?" a little querulously.

"One cannot very well help seeing what is straight before one."

"I thought your eyes were shut," I say, remembering how I had studied all that was visible of his calm grave face a while ago, wondering what he thought of me.

"They were not shut. What were you trying to find out just now?"

"When?" I ask, though I know very well.

"When you did me the honor to consider me so intently."

"I was trying to find out what you thought of me, Ronald."

"And did you find out?"

"Not much. You have one of those faces which I cannot read."

"Then I have the advantage of you there."

"Can you read my face?"

"Very often I can," he answers, smiling a little.

"You have an interesting study, then?"

"I think I have. Rosalie, would you like to know what I think of you?"

"I know you think me very foolish."

"Then you do very much for me?"

"You could not tell me anything pleasant—with a rather forced laugh. "I wish we were at Yattenden, Ronald; don't you?"

"I do for your sake, Rosalie, are you to see that fellow Baxter again?"

The name sends a shiver through my veins. And yet it is for ever ringing in my ears.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"I am glad to hear it," he says, without answering my question.

"Why are you glad?"

"Because it is neither good for you nor for him."

I should be angry if Ronald did not look so grave, did not speak in such a matter of fact, fatherly way.

"He is going to Italy," I say, in rather a subdued voice.

"And you have taken charge of his wife?"

"Yes."

Ronald expresses neither approval nor disapproval. I wonder if he despises me—if he thinks that I am breaking my heart about a lad who by all accounts could not have cared very much for me? I am almost sorry I, like a coward, refused to let him tell me what he thought of me just now. But I had shrunk from another lecture, knowing the folly and wickedness of my undisciplined heart.

"Ronald, you have redeemed your promise nobly," I say, stretching out my hand to him in my old impulsive fashion. "You have been a true friend to me; you have borne with me very patiently; do not think too badly of me, if you can help it."

He bends forward out of the shadow to take my hand.

"All my efforts must be directed the other way, Rosalie," he answers quietly.

looking at me with brown eyes, which for once I cannot fail to read. But I shake my head, laughing a little.

"I warrant I love you more than you do me!" I quote, drawing my hand away rather quickly.

And we say no more till the train stops, and I see my own carriage-lamps glimmer in the darkness, and my own livery on the platform; and I ask if they are all well at Yattenden, and am told that they are all well, but very uneasy because I had not come down by the earlier train.

(To be continued.)

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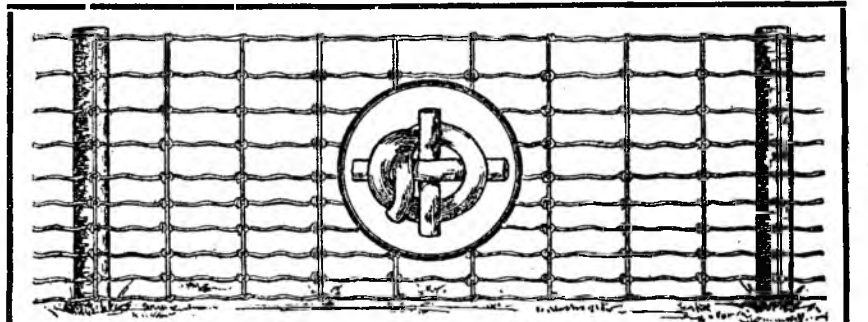
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