

# A SEVERE TRIAL;

OR, THE MEMORY OF A BOY WITH DARK EYES.

## CHAPTER XIV.

"Isn't he a jolly little fellow, Olive?" Olive glances at the cherub-faced boy on my lap, whom I have been smothering with kisses.

"He is a fine child, certainly." "A fine child!" I exclaim with laughing indignation. "You speak of him as if he were some young creature whom you were fattening for a prize."

Olive glances at us from her low chair inside the window. I am sitting on the steps just outside, holding the sturdy, two-year-old boy in my arms. September sunshine makes glorious the ruddy gables of my old house, rising sharply defined against the serene blue sky. September sunshine dreams on the smooth terrace, on the trim walks and careful flower-beds of my sheltered garden, just as it dreamed upon them three years ago, when my sick eyes saw no beauty in them, nor in the sunshine, nor in any other fair or lovely thing.

"You will spoil him, Allie," Olive says; but at the same time she smiles indulgently.

"Spend him! You are not capable of being spoiled, Scott; are you? You take after your godmother, my fair child! As if anybody could spoil such a darling, Olive! Why, the nicest thing I could say of him wouldn't be half nice enough!"

"Not half nice enough!" Scott corroborates, in a perfect temper of chuckles. "You delicious little mite!" I laugh encouragingly, kissing his rosy cheeks, his bloomy cheeks, his dimpled elbows, whilst he makes vain snatches at my hair, at my ear-rings, at my nose even, with his chubby dimpled fists. "Why, Olive, if I were you I should do nothing but kiss him all day long!"

"I wonder who would become of Hyacinth and the vicarage, and the parish generally, if I made a goose of myself?" Olive says demurely.

I take great delight in spoiling my little godson, partly because he is such a splendid little fellow, but principally because it is so amusing to hear Olive protesting against it. She has grown so deliciously matter-of-fact since she married Mr. Lockhart! Three years have transformed her from a scatter-brained girl into the most amusingly demure matron who ever pretended not to adore her husband, or to think her children the most perfect children that ever were born.

"I wonder how you will bring up your own children one of these days, Olive observes in her precise voice, glancing at me over the pinafore she is embroidering.

"I shall never have any children to bring up. I shall be a rich old spinster, and Scott shall be my adopted son, and I will leave Woodhay to him when I die, and he shall take the name of Scott—Scott Lockhart Scott. Doesn't it sound well, Olive?"

"It sounds well enough," Olive says, smiling.

"But you don't think it will ever come to pass?"

"I hope it will never come to pass."

"You hope your son won't have Woodhay, Olive?"

"I hope your own son will have Woodhay, Allie. You have done enough for Scott already."

"By presenting him with an ugly silver mug the day he was christened?"

Olive shakes her head, denuded of its golden fringe now, with sleek golden braids drawn back plainly from her forehead instead, and plaited neatly at the back of her neck.

"My dear Allie, I should be sorry to think of your living the cheerless life you have mapped out for yourself. It seems all very well now, while you are young and have plenty of friends. But think how lonely you would feel by-and-by when you begin to grow old, without husband or children to care for you with nobody in the world who really loved you, perhaps as a wife and mother is sure to be loved!"

If I sigh, Olive does not hear me, though her pink ears are sharp enough. "My dear, I have been resigned to my fate this long time back. I say carelessly, pulling one of Scott's elastic curls straight and then letting it run into glossy flaxen spirals again, "and, after all, it is not such a very terrible thing to be an old maid."

"I think it is a terrible thing," Olive answers seriously—"a very terrible thing."

"You did not think so always, Olive. I remember when you ridiculed the idea of matrimony and were going in for woman's rights and all that kind of thing."

"Oh, that was before I knew!" Olive says softly. "Did you ever hear of a woman who had a husband and children wishing she were an old maid, Allie?"

"Why do you try to put me out of conceit with my lot, Olive?" I exclaim fretfully. "I said long ago that I should never marry, and I never shall. But I mean to be happy in my own way. I am happy—just as happy as half the married women in the world."

Olive shakes her smooth head again, very positively this time. "I wish Digges would come with our tea," I say, yawning.

My godson has scrambled off my lap, my book has fallen to the ground, there seems to have come a cold breath of air from somewhere or other. I shiver in my blue and gold-colored chintz gown.

"It is early yet," Olive returns, placidly threading her needle.

"Not so very early"—looking at my watch. "I wonder what sport Ronald has had? I haven't heard any shots lately; have you?"

"One cannot hear much when you and Scott are romping with each other."

"I am sure he ought to have had enough of it by this time," I say, not

alluding to the romping. "He started off the moment after breakfast—seven good hours ago, at the very least."

"Are you in a hurry to have him back, Allie?"

"Not the slightest. Only it is astonishing how the thing never seems to pall upon them!"

Olive looks at me, and the expression of her face annoys me.

"May I ask what is amusing?" I inquire crossly.

"O, nothing! Only, for such a confirmed spinster—"

"Olive, the end of it will be that I shall quarrel with you."

"I hope not," Olive says equably. "Here is Sir Ronald coming up the lawn."

I had seen him before she spoke, crossing the grass leisurely, his gun under his arm, and his dogs at his heels. He wears knickerbockers and coarse ribbed shooting stockings, and he looks very well—or I like his look very well—as he comes up to the window.

"Just in time for tea, Ronald."

"I don't care for tea, Rosalie," he laughs, leaning his gun against the wall and sitting down on the steps at a little distance from me. "But I don't mind assisting at the ceremony once in a way."

"Had you any sport, Ronald?"

"She hopes you had not," Olive interpolates mischievously.

"Why does she hope that?" Ronald asks, looking at me.

"Don't mind Olive; she is intensely disagreeable to-day," I laugh, shrugging my shoulders.

"Digges has brought up a gyp-table in front of me and laid the tea-things upon it—my dainty Sevres cups and saucers, my gilded spoons, my favorite plum-cake, piled high on a Sevres dish, Olive's favorite home-made biscuits, a basket of ripe black plums."

"What have you been doing with yourself all day, Rosalie?" Ronald asks, with apparent irrelevance.

"Gardening a little, and driving with Aunt Rosa."

"Why did you not come to meet me, as you promised you would?"

"I don't know."

"I was looking out for you in the larch wood."

"Were you?"

"Is that the way in which you keep your promises, Rosalie?"

"I scarcely ever make any promises."

"So much the better, since you can break them so easily."

"I intended to go, Ronald."

"Then why did you not come?"

If I had any reason at all, it was such a silly one that I do not care to tell it to him—indeed nothing would induce me to tell it to him, of all people in the world. I have gone to meet him on his way back from shooting probably a hundred times; but of late I have shrunk from treating him with the sisterly familiarity which has rendered our intercourse with each other so pleasant to me, at least—for the last three years.

When or how this new feeling of shyness sprung up it would puzzle me to tell. Ronald has always treated me like a younger sister, with a gentle protecting kindness which has nothing of the lover about it. I believe his last attempt at love making was in the train that evening, three years ago, when he brought me down to Woodhay. I do not remember a single word, a single look since then which could be construed into the most distant approach to anything beyond cousinly or brotherly affection. And I have ignored the past just as entirely—perhaps it was easier for me to do it than for him—and found it very pleasant to have Ronald to go to in all my difficulties, to ease me in a great measure of all my cares of state, for though we do not live in the same county, or in the same country—Ronald's place, Balquharrie, is in Scotland—he comes to Woodhay often, and we write to each other constantly—long letters, chiefly on business, but letters which I think are a pleasure to us both. I know they are a pleasure to me.

I have had a great many offers of marriage during the last three years, more than I care to remember. I dismissed my suitors one after the other, with no qualms of conscience, for even the vainest of them could not say that I had bestowed any favors upon him, or given him any reason to believe that I would lend a favorable ear to his suit. The only one for whom I felt any sympathy was poor Guskie Deane. It did grieve me—for the space of a day—to send him away sorrowing; but then neither had I ever given him any encouragement—my greatest enemy could not call me a flirt. Gus had gone out to the Cape, he went more than a year ago; Olive hears from him sometimes. She

says she thinks he is getting rather fond of his colonel's daughter, a nice girl whom we used to know in London, and I hope it is the case. Ellinor Deane is married to Jack Rolloston; I have had them down here at Woodhay on a visit. Poppy and her husband are in Ceylon.

Ronald Scott had never gone back to India. A distant relative—a third or fourth cousin of his mother's, I believe, and a very old man—had died before his year's holiday was over, leaving him Balquharrie, a fine wild place in the north of Scotland, which it seems he always knew would one day be his. I have never been there; but I have seen photographs of the old castle, with its keep and drawbridge, and the great wild mountains towering up behind it. Sometimes a disagreeable thought obtrudes itself into my mind that something will be marrying somebody some of these days, and that I shall lose my friend. But I put the idea away from me persistently; when the misfortune happens it will be time enough to lament over it. Meanwhile Ronald belongs to me.

Dear old Uncle Tod died two years ago, and since his death Aunt Rosa has lived with me. At his death the Lockharts moved into the vicarage. It is pleasant to have Olive so near—scarcely a day passes that we do not see each other—her nursery is one of my favorite haunts. When I am enjoying myself there, nobody would suppose that I was the unapproachable Miss Somers of Woodhay—so, at least, Olive tells me when she interrupts some glorious pomp. And I am happy enough, with a kind of negative happiness—I manage to live, and take some pleasure out of life—without the heart which I buried, the day I came of age, far down in the depths of my shadowy combe. I have never attempted to raise it up again—I do not suppose I could, if I would. I have loved and done with love—I gave

my heart to Gerard Baxter three years ago and a half ago, and if I have any heart left, it is his still. Deep down, far away from the disturbing pleasures and cares of every day, lies the memory of a boy with dark eyes—the memory of a tall handsome lad whom I loved long ago, whom I know—if I dared to disturb the moss and long grasses about that buried heart—I love still, as I shall never love any one else in the world.

"I thought you were in a hurry for tea, Allie?"

Olive's voice wakes me out of a reverie.

"I wonder where Lily is?" I remark, as I arrange my cups and saucers.

"In her room, I think."

"Poor child!" I say softly.

"She seems very nervous and excited, Allie, doesn't she?"

"I suppose so."

I feel very nervous and excited myself, though I try not to think of to-morrow. I have been learning a lesson for the last three years, and I am afraid, now that I shall soon be called upon to repeat it, my courage may fail at the last moment.

If I could have saved myself so severe a trial, I would have done it; but I could not very well. And after all, it is better to have it over. The test must come sooner or later, and sometimes I almost long for it with a fever of impatience, for, till I have tried my own endurance, how can I know that it will stand?

"Scott, will you run in and pull the bell-drawing—or stay, I will go for her myself. Here is your tea, Olive, and excuse me for a moment—I want to see what Lily is about."

I find her in the pretty south room, which I have had fitted up for her. She is standing before the glass, a slender figure in a long white gown.

"Lily!"

She turns round at the sound of my voice.

"Admiring yourself, you vain child?"

She runs to me, throws her arms round me, and bursts into a sudden passion of tears.

"My dear Lily, what are you crying for, on this day, of all days in the year!"

Only sobs answer me. I touch her hair tenderly. Here is your tea, Olive, and excuse me for a moment—I want to see what Lily is about."

"I cannot help it, Rosalie, oh, Rosalie, what if he should not care for me—what if he should have cared for somebody else—"

"He has not cared for anybody else since he left you, darling."

"But how do you know?"

"I know. And I have come to take you down to tea. Dry your eyes and come with me."

She dries her eyes obediently; she is just as much of a child still as she was three years ago. In other things she is improved out of all resemblance to her former self. In appearance she has, if anything, gained in attractiveness, while in manner she is as different from the girl I brought down to Woodhay three years ago as she is in education and refinement of speech. I have taken pains to make Gerard's wife as beautiful mentally as she is outwardly, for his sake, and I have been rewarded by a most unexpected measure of success. Lily is as fair as the flower she is called after—the wretched surroundings of her neglected childhood have not smirched the whiteness of her soul.

A little wayward she is still, a little willful even; but to me she is always obedience itself. I think she always would be to any one she loved.

And she loves me with a perfect passion of devotion. Whether she would love me so much if she knew how Gerard once loved me I know not—I have taken

care that she shall never hear that story from me or from any one else.

"What shall I do if he hates me, Rosalie?"

"I am holding one of the small trembling hands, smoothing back the tendrils of red gold hair out of the velvety sapphire blue eyes. The beauty of the wistful face sends a strange pang to my heart."

"Hate you, darling! As if he could!"

"He never loved me as I loved him, Rosalie."

"Then he will fall in love with you to-morrow," I assure her, smiling. She smiles, too, at that, a very childlike smile.

"If I could only think it—"

"My darling, you may be sure of it. He will not be able to help himself."

"Am I so different from what I was then?"

The deep velvety eyes search my face wistfully, the color burns deeper and deeper in the rounded cheeks.

"Just the difference that he would wish to see. Lily. You were a child then, darling; now you are a woman, ready to lend a woman's earnest helpful life."

"If I may only help him, Rosalie!"

"You shall help him. See how he has got on—what a name he has made for himself! And if he has done so much alone, what will he not do with you to cheer and encourage him?"

She sighs, as if the picture oppressed her with its weight of felicity.

"What have you been doing up here all the afternoon, Lily?"

"Looking at myself in the glass," she answers at once.

"What a child you are!" I say, laughing.

"It was childish, wasn't it? But, if you knew, Rosalie—"

"I do know, darling—I know all about it."

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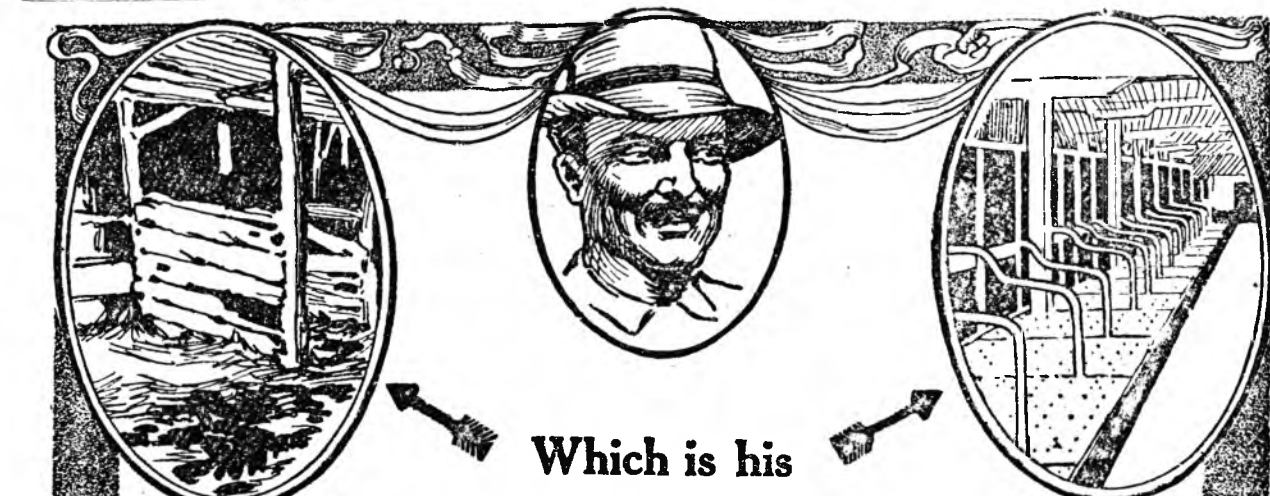
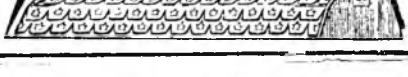
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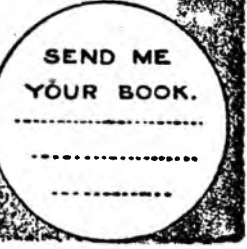
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