

UNCLE MAX.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.—Continued.

Early the next morning I heard them preparing Lady Betty's room, and once when I went into the passage in search of Chatty I met Leah coming out with a dusting-brush; she looked very sullen, and took no notice of my greeting. Chatty helped me arrange my goods and chattels; as we worked together she told me confidentially that master had been scolding Leah, and that she ought to be ashamed of herself; and when Miss Darrell had taken her part he had been with her too. "Thornton says Miss Darrell has been crying, and has not eaten a mouthful of breakfast," went on Chatty; but I silenced these imprudent communications. It was quite evident that I was a bone of contention in the household, and that Mr. Hamilton would have some difficulty in subduing Leah's contumacy.

I wrote to Ellen Watson that morning, and soon received a rapturous acceptance of my invitation. She would be delighted to come to the cottage and to look after my poor people. "I am very much stronger," she wrote, "but I must not go back to the hospital for two months: a breath of country air will be delicious, and it is so good of you, my dear Miss Garston, to think of me, and am sure Mrs. Barton will make me comfortable, and I will do all I can for Janet Coombe and that dear little orphan child."

I showed Mr. Hamilton the letter, and while he was reading it Chatty brought me word that Uncle Max was waiting to speak to me. "If you like to go down to him I will wait here until you come back," he said; and I was too glad to avail myself of this offer, for Gladys seemed more suffering and restless than usual. I found Max walking up and down the drawing-room. As he came forward to meet me his face looked quite old and haggard.

"I am glad you have not kept me waiting, Ursula. I sent up that message in spite of Leah's telling me that you never left the sick-room." "Leah is wrong," replied, coolly. "Mr. Hamilton insists on my going in the garden for at least half an hour daily, while Chatty takes my place. I cannot stay long, Max; but all the same I am glad you sent for me."

"I felt I must see you," he returned, rather huskily. "Letters are so unsatisfactory; but it was good of you to write, always so kind and thoughtful, my dear." He paused for a moment as though to recover himself. "She is very ill, Ursula." "Very ill?" "How gravely you speak! Are things worse than you told me? You do not mean to tell me there is absolute danger?" "Oh, no; certainly not; but it is very sad to see her in such a state. Her nerves have quite broken down; all these three years have told on her, and there seems some fresh trouble on her mind!"

"God forbid!" he returned, quickly. "Ay, God forbid, for he alone knows what is burdening the mind of this young creature: she is too weak to throw off her nervous fancies. She blames herself for harboring such gloomy thoughts, and it distresses her not to be able to control them. The night is her worst time! I had said work with her sometimes."

I spared Max further particulars: he was harassed and anxious enough. I would not harrow up his feelings by telling him how often that feeble, piteous voice trembled from my light combings, how hurrying to her bedside, I would find Gladys bathed in tears, and cold and trembling in every limb, and how she would cling to me, pouring out an incoherent account of some vague shadowy terror that was on her.

There were other things I could have told him: how in that semi-delirium his name, as well as Etta's, was perpetually on her lips, uttered in a tone sometimes tender, but more often reproachful, sometimes in a very anxious regret. Now I understood why she dreaded Etta's presence in her room: she feared betraying herself to those keen ears. Often after one of these outbreaks she would strive to collect her scattered faculties.

"Have I been talking nonsense, Ursula," she would ask, in a tremulous voice. "I have been dreaming, I think, and the pain in my head confuses me so: do not let me talk much." But I always succeeded in soothing her.

who was always delighted to do an errand in the village. "I don't think what makes Miss Darrell so curious, ma'am, the girl once said to me. 'She asks me every day if I have begun down the village.' She did it while master was by the other afternoon, and he told her quite sharply it was no affair of hers."

"Never mind that, Chatty." "Oh, but I am afraid she means mischief, ma'am," persisted Chatty, who had a great dislike to Miss Darrell, which she showed by being somewhat pert to her. "For the said such a queer tone to master. 'There, I told you so: now you will believe me,' and master looked as though he were not pleased."

As I strolled round the garden in Nap's company I often saw Leah sitting sewing at her mistress's window: she would put down her work and watch me until I was out of sight. I felt the woman hated me, and this surveillance was very unpleasant to me. I never felt quite free until I reached the kitchen-garden.

Mr. Hamilton visited his sister's room regularly three times a day. He never stayed long: he would satisfy himself about her condition, say a few cheerful words to her, and that was all. His manner to me was grave and professional. Now and then when he had given her directions, he would ask me if there were anything he could do for me, and if I were comfortable; and yet, in spite of his reserve and guarded looks and words, I felt an atmosphere of protection and comfort surrounding me that I had not known since Charlie's death.

Every day I had proofs of his thought for me. The flowers and fruits that were sent into the sick-room were for me as well as Gladys. I was often touched to see how some taste of mine had been remembered and gratified: sometimes Chatty would tell me that master had given orders that such a thing should be provided for Miss Garston; and in many other ways he made me feel that I was not forgotten.

For some days Gladys continued very ill; she slept fitfully and uneasily, waking in terror from some dream that escaped her memory. I used to hear her moaning, and to be beside her before she opened her eyes. "It is only a nightmare," I would say to her as she clung to me like a frightened child; but it was not always easy to banish the grisly phantoms of a diseased and over-wrought imagination. The morbid condition of her mind was aggravated and increased by physical weakness; at the least exertion she had fainting-fits that alarmed us.

She told me more than once that a sense of sin oppressed her; she must be more wicked than other people, or she thought Providence would not permit her to be so unhappy. Sometimes she blamed herself with influencing Eric wrongly: she ought not to have taken his part against his brother. "He that hateth his brother is a murderer, Ursula, there were times, I am sure, when I hated Giles." And with this thought upon her she would beg him to forgive her when he next came into the room.

He never seemed surprised at these exaggerated expressions of penitence: he treated it all as part of her malady. "Very well, I will forgive you, my dear," he would say, feeling her pulse. "Have you taken your medicine, Gladys?" "Oh, I have, Giles, but I feel so wretched about it all. Are you sure that you really and truly forgive me?" "Quite sure," he returned, smiling at her. "Now you must shut your eyes, like a good child, and go to sleep. But, though she tried to obey him, I could see she was not satisfied; tears rolled down her cheeks from under her closed eyelids.

"What is it, my darling?" I asked, kissing her. "Do you feel more ill than usual?" "No, no; it is only this sense of sin. Oh, Ursula, how nice it would be to die, and never do anything wrong again!" And so she went on bemoaning herself. I had thought it better to move her into Lady Betty's room. It was a large square room opening out of the turret-room, and very light and airy. I had a little bed put up for my use, so that I could hear her every movement. I told Mr. Hamilton that I could not feel easy to have her out of my sight; and he quite agreed with me. In the daytime we carried her into the turret-room. The little recess formed by the circular window made a charming sitting-room, and just held Gladys's couch and an easy-chair and a little round table with a basket of hot-house flowers on it. Mr. Hamilton declared that we looked very cosy when he first found us there.

with an old friend of his who knew Gladys's constitution. On the threshold I encountered Miss Darrell. "Were you looking for any one?" she asked, coldly. "Yes, for Chatty. I want Mr. Hamilton to know that Gladys has had three hours' sleep, and has awakened refreshed and without any nervous feelings. Will you be kind enough to tell him?" "Oh, certainly; not that I attach much importance to such a transient improvement. Gladys's case is far too serious for me to be so sanguine. I believe you have not nursed these nervous patients before. If Giles had taken my advice he would have had a person trained to this special work."

"Gladys's case does not require that sort of nurse," I replied, quickly. "Excuse me, Miss Darrell, but I am anxious that Mr. Hamilton should know of his sister's improvement before he goes out. Chatty told me that they had sent for him from Abbey Farm."

"Yes, I believe so," she replied, carelessly. "Don't trouble yourself, Miss Garston: I am quite as anxious as yourself that Giles's mind should be put at rest. He has had a very good night, poor fellow."

I was rather surprised and disappointed when, ten minutes afterwards, I heard the hall door close, and, hurrying to a window, I saw Mr. Hamilton walking very quickly in the direction of Maplehurst. A moment afterwards Chatty brought me a message from him. He had been called off suddenly, and might not be back for hours. If I wanted him, Atkinson was to take one of the horses. He would probably be at Abbey Farm or at Guster's Cottages in the Croft.

This message rather puzzled me. After turning it over in my mind, I went in search of Miss Darrell. I found her in the conservatory gathering some flowers. "Did you give my message to Mr. Hamilton?" I asked, rather abruptly. I thought she hesitated and seemed a little confused. "What message? Oh, I remember,—about Gladys. No, I just missed him: he had gone out. But it is of no consequence, is it? I will tell him when he comes home."

I would not trust myself to reply. She must have purposely loitered on her way down-stairs, hoping to annoy me. He would spend an anxious day, for I knew he was very uncomfortable about Gladys: perhaps he would write to Dr. Townsend. It was no use speaking to Miss Darrell: she was only too ready to thwart me on all occasions. I would take the matter into my own hands. I went down to the stables and found Atkinson, and asked him to ride over to Abbey Farm and take a note to his master.

"I hope Miss Gladys is not worse, ma'am," he said, civilly, looking rather alarmed at his errand; but when I had satisfied him on this point he promised to find him as quickly as possible. "There is only Whitefoot in the stable," he said. "Master has both the browns out; Norris was to pick him up in the village. But he is quite fresh, and will do the job easily." I wrote my note while Whitefoot was being saddled, and then went back to the house. Miss Darrell looked at me suspiciously.

"I thought I heard voices in the stable yard," she said; and I at once told her what I had done. "For the first time she seemed utterly confounded. 'You told Atkinson to saddle Whitefoot and go all these miles just to carry that ridiculous message! I wonder what Giles will say,' she observed, indignantly. 'All these years that I have managed his house I should never have thought of taking such a liberty.' This was hard to bear, but I answered her with seeming coolness: 'If Mr. Hamilton thinks I am wrong, he will tell me so in this house I am only accountable to him.' And I walked away with much dignity.

But I knew I had been right when I saw Mr. Hamilton's face that evening, for he did not return until seven o'clock. He came up at once, and beckoned me into Lady Betty's room. "Thank you for your thoughtfulness, Miss Garston," he said, gratefully. "You have spared me a wretchedly anxious day. A bad accident case at Abbey Farm called me off, and I had only time to get my things ready, and I was obliged to see the colonel first. If you had not sent me that note I should have written to Dr. Townsend. But why did you Chatty bring me a message before I went?" I explained that I had given the message to Miss Darrell. "That is very strange," he observed, thoughtfully. "Thornton was helping me in the hall when I saw Etta watering her flower-stand. Well never mind; she shall have her lecture presently. Now let us go to Gladys."

say to him. I have begun to distrust her in most things." "I do not think that it matters much what she says to him," I returned, briskly; "for it would never do to leave her anxious on this point. 'You know I have provided an antidote in the shape of daily notes.' 'Surely you do not write every day,' taking her fan from the table with a trembling hand. 'What can you have to say to Mr. Cunliffe about me?' And I could see she waited for my answer with suppressed eagerness."

"Oh, he likes to know how you sleep," I returned, carelessly, "and if you are quieter and more cheerful. Uncle Max has soon sympathy with people who are ill; he is very kind-hearted."

"Oh, yes; I never knew any one more so," she replied, gently; but I detected a yearning tone in her voice, as though she was longing for his sympathy then. We did not say any more, but I thought she was a trifle restless that afternoon, and yet she looked happier; she spoke once or twice, as though she were tired of remaining up-stairs. "I think I am stronger. Does Giles consider it necessary for me to stop up here," she asked, once. "If it were not for Etta I should like to be in the drawing-room. But no, that would be an end to our peace. And here she looked a little excited. 'But if Giles would let me have a drive.'"

I promised to speak to him on the subject of the drive, for I was sure that he would all the proposition most gladly as a sign of returning health; but I told her that in my opinion it would be better for her to remain quietly in these two pleasant rooms until she was stronger and more fit to endure the little daily annoyances that are so trying to a nervous invalid. "When that time comes you will have to part with your nurse," I went on, in a joking tone. But I was grieved to see that at the first hint of my leaving her she clung to me with the old alarm visible in her manner. "You must not say that! I cannot part with you, Ursula," she exclaimed, vehemently. "If you go, you must take me with you." And it was some time before she would let herself be laughed out of her anxious thoughts.

When I revolved all these things in my mind,—her prolonged delicacy and painful sensitiveness, her aversion to her cousin, and her evident dread of the future,—I felt that the time had come to seek a more complete understanding on a point that still perplexed me: I must come to the bottom of that singular change in her manner to Max. I must know without doubt and reserve the real state of her feeling with regard to him and her cousin Claude. If, as I had grown to think during these weeks of illness, one of these two men, and no Eric, was the chief cause of her melancholy, I must know which of these two had so agitated her young life. But in my own mind I never doubted which it was.

This was the difficult task I had set myself, and I felt that it would not be easy to approach the subject. Gladys was exceedingly reserved, even with me; it had cost her an effort to speak to me of Eric, and she had never once mentioned her cousin Captain Hamilton's name. A woman like Gladys would be extremely reticent on the subject of lovers: the deeper her feelings, the more she would conceal them. Unlike other girls, I never heard her speak in the light jesting way with which others mention a love-affair. She once told me that she considered it far too sacred and serious to be used as a topic of general conversation. "People do not know what they are talking about when they say such things," she said, in a moved voice; "there is no reverence, and little reticence, nowadays. Girls talk of falling in love, or men falling in love with them, as lightly as they would speak of going to the theatre. They do not consider the responsibility, the awfulness, of such an election, being chosen out of a whole world of women, to be the light and life of a man's home. Oh, it hurts me to hear some girls talk!" she finished, with a slight shudder.

Knowing the purity and brightness of this girl's nature, I confess I hesitated long in intruding myself into that inner sanctuary that she guarded so carefully; but for Max's sake—poor Max, who grew more tired-looking and haggard every day—I felt it would be well to speak to her. So one evening, when we were sitting quietly together enjoying the cool evening air, I took Gladys's thin hand in mine and asked her if she felt well enough for me to talk to her about something that had long troubled me, and that I feared speaking to her about, dreading lest I should displease her. I thought she looked a little apprehensive at my seriousness, but she replied very sweetly, and the tears came into her beautiful eyes as she spoke, that nothing I could say or do could displease her; that it was so true a friend to her that it would be impossible for her to take offence.

"I am glad of that, Gladys dear," I returned, quietly. "For I have long wanted courage to ask a question. What is the real reason of your estrangement from Max?" and then, growing bolder, I whispered in her ear, as she shrank from me, "I do not ask what are your feelings to him, for I think I have guessed them,—unless, indeed, I am wrong, and you prefer your cousin Captain Hamilton." I almost feared that I had been too abrupt and awkward when I saw her sudden paleness: she began to tremble like a leaf until I mentioned Captain Hamilton's name, and then she turned to me with a look of mingled astonishment and indignation. "Claude? Are you out of your senses, Ursula? Who has put such an idea into your head?"

I remembered Uncle Max's injunctions to secrecy, and felt I must be careful. "I thought that it could not be Captain Hamilton," I returned, rather lamely; "but she interrupted me in a tone of poignant distress, and there was a sudden tremble in her eyes, brought there by my mention of Claude's name. 'Oh, this is dreadful!' she exclaimed: 'you come to me and talk about Claude, knowing all the time that I have never breathed his name to you. Who has spoken it, then? how could such a thought arise in your mind? It must be Etta, and we are undone,—undone!' 'My darling, you must not excite yourself about a mere mistake,' I returned, anxious to soothe her. 'I cannot tell you how it came into my head; that is my little secret, Gladys, my dear: if you agitate yourself at a word we shall never understand each other. I want you to trust me as you would trust a dear sister,—we are sisters in heart, Gladys'—but here I blushed over my words and wished them unuttered,—and to tell me exactly what has passed between you and Max."

Giles to let her worm the truth out of him?" "If Lady Betty and Miss Darrell know you might surely trust me,—your friend," I returned. "Gladys, you know how I honor reticence in such matters; I am the last person to force an unwilling confidence; but there are reasons—no, I cannot explain myself; you must trust me implicitly or not at all. I do not think you will ever repent that trust; and for your own sake as well as mine I implore you to confide in me." For a moment she looked at me with wide, troubled eyes, then she ceased to hesitate. "What is it you want to know?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Everything, all that has passed between you and my poor Max, who always seems so terribly unhappy. Is it not you who have to answer for that unhappiness?" A pained expression crossed her face. "It is true that I made him unhappy once, but that is long ago; and men are not like us: they get over things. Oh, I must explain it to you, or you will not understand. Do not be hard upon me: I have been sorely punished," she sighed; and for a few moments there was silence between us. I had no wish to hurry her. I knew her well: she was long in giving her confidence, but when once she gave it, it would be lavishly, generously, and without stint, just as she would give her love, for Gladys was one of those rare creatures who could do nothing meanly or by halves.

Presently she began to speak of her own accord: "You know how good Mr. Cunliffe was to me in my trouble; at least you can guess, though you can never really know it. When I was most forlorn and miserable I used to feel less wretched and hopeless when he was beside me; in every possible way he strengthened and braced me for daily life; he roused me from my state of selfish despondency, put work into my hands, and encouraged me to persevere. If it had not been for his help and sympathy, I never could have lived through those bitter days when all around me believed that my darling Eric had died a coward's death."

"Do not speak of Eric to-night, dearest," I observed, alarmed at her excessive paleness as she uttered his name. "No," with a faint smile at my anxious tone; "we are talking about some one else this evening. Ursula, you may imagine how grateful I was,—how I grew to look upon him as my best friend, how I learned to confide in him as though he were a wise elder brother."

"A brother!—oh, G'ads!" "It was the truth," she went on, mournfully: "no other thought entered my mind, and you may conceive the shock when one morning he came to me, pale and agitated, and asked me if I could love him well enough to marry him." "How I recall that morning! It was May, and I had just come in from the garden, laden with pink and white May blossoms, and long trails of laburnum, and there he was waiting for me in the drawing-room. Every one was out, and he was alone. 'I fancied he looked different,—rather nervous and excited,—but I never guessed the reason until he began to speak, and then I thought I should have broken my heart to hear him,—that I must give him pain who had been so good to me. Oh, Ursula! I had never had such cruel work to do as that.'

"But I must be true to him as well as myself: this was my one thought. I did not love him well enough to be his wife; he had not touched my heart in that way; and, as I believed at that time that I could never care sufficiently for any man to wish to marry him, I felt that I dared not let him deceive himself with any future hopes."

"You were quite right, my darling. Do not look so miserable. Max would only honor you the more for your truthfulness." "Yes, but he knew me better than I know myself," she whispered. "When he begged to speak to me again I wanted to refuse, but he would not let me. He asked me—and there were tears in his eyes—not to be so hard on him, to let him judge for us both in this one thing. He pressed me, so, and he looked so unhappy, I at last gave way at last, and said that after a year's time he might speak again. I remember telling him, as he thanked me very gratefully, that I should not consider him bound in any way; that I had no little hope to give him that I had no right to hold him to anything; if he did not come to me when a year had expired, I should know that he had changed. There was a gleam in his eyes as I said this that made me feel for the first time the strength and purpose of a man's will. I grew timid and embarrassed all at once, and a strange feeling came over me. Was I, after all, so certain that I should never love him? I could only breathe freely when he had left me."

"Yes, dear, I understand," I returned, soothingly, for she had covered her face with her hands, as though overpowered with some recollection. "Ursula," she whispered, "he was right. I had never thought of such things. I did not know my own feelings. Before three months were over I knew I could give him the answer he wanted. I regretted the year's delay; but for shame, I would have made him understand how it was with me."

"Could you not have given me a sign that your feelings were altered, Gladys? It would have been generous and kind of you to have ended his suspense." "I tried, but it was not easy; but he must have noticed the change in me. If I were shy and embarrassed with him it was because I cared for him so much. It used to make me happy only to see him; if he did not speak to me, I was quite content to know he was in the room. I used to treasure up his looks and words and heard them in my memory; it did not seem to me that any other man could compare with him. You have often laughed at my hero-worship, but I made a hero of him."

my changed feelings to Giles, she agreed at once, and I will do her justice to own that she has kept her word in this. Giles has not an idea of the truth."

"Nevertheless, I wish you had kept your own counsel, Gladys." "You could not wish it more than I do; but, indeed, I said very little. I think my manner told her more than my words, for I cannot remember really saying anything sensible. I knew she pined me with sympathy, and when I did not answer them she laughed and said that she knew."

I have paid dearly for my want of caution, for I have been in bondage ever since. My tacit admission that I cared for Mr. Cunliffe has given Etta a cruel hold over me; my thoughts do not seem my own. She knows how to wound me: one word from her makes me shrink into myself. Sometimes I think she takes pleasure in my secret misery,—that she delights in acting a part when she pre- tends to sympathize with me. Oh, what a weak fool I have been, Ursula, to put myself in the power of such a woman!"

"Poor Gladys!" I said, kissing her; and she dashed away her indignant tear, and hurried on. "Oh, let me finish all the miserable story. There is not much to say, but that little is humiliating. It was soon after this that I noticed a change in Mr. Cunliffe's manner. Scarcely perceptible at first, it became daily more marked. He came less often, and when he came he scarcely spoke to me. It was then that Etta began to torment me, and under the garb of kindness, to say things that I could not bear. She asked me if Mr. Cunliffe were not a little distant in his manners to me. She did not wish to distress me, but there certainly was a change in him. No, I must not trouble myself, but people were talking. When a vicar was young and unmarried, and as fascinating as Mr. Cunliffe, people would talk."

"What did they say? Ah, that was no matter, surely. Well, if I would press her, two or three ladies would have hinted that a certain young lady, who should be nameless, was rather too eager in her pursuit of the vicar."

"Such nonsense, Gladys, my dear," she went on, as I remained dumb and sick at heart on such an imputation. "Of course I told them it was only your enthusiasm for good works." "She meets him in her district and at the mothers' meeting; and what can be the harm of that?" I said to them. "And of course she cannot refuse to sing at the penny readings and people's entertainments when she knows that she gives such pleasure to the poor people, and it is rather hard that she should be accused of wanting to display her fine voice." Oh, you may be sure that I took your part. Of course it is a pity folks should believe such things, but I hope I made them properly ashamed of themselves."

"You may imagine how uneasy these insinuations made me. You know my sensitiveness, and how prone I am to exaggerate things. It seemed to me that more lay behind the margin of her words; and I was not wrong."

"In a little while there were other things hinted to me, but very gently. Ah, she was kind enough to me in those days. And I do not think that I was a little too imprudent and unreserved in my manner to Mr. Cunliffe? She hated to make me uncomfortable, and of course I was so innocent that I meant no harm; but men were peculiar, especially a man like Mr. Cunliffe; she was afraid he might notice my want of self-control."

"You do not see yourself, Gladys," she said, once; "a child would find out that you are over head and ears in love with him. Perhaps it would not matter so much under other circumstances, but I confess I am a little uneasy. His manner was very cold and strange last night: he seemed afraid to trust himself alone with you. Do be careful, my dear. Suppose, after all, his feelings are changed, and that he fears to tell you so?" "Ursula, can you not understand the slow torture of these days and weeks, the first insidious doubts, the increasing fears, that seemed to be corroborated day by day? Yes, it was not my fancy; Etta was right; he was certainly changed; he no longer loved me."

"In desperation I acted upon her advice, and resigned my parish work. It seemed to me that I was parting with the last shred of my happiness when I did so. I made weak health my excuse, and indeed I was far from well; but I had the anguish of seeing the unspoken reproach in Mr. Cunliffe's eyes; he thought me cowardly, vacillating; he was disappointed in me."

(To be continued.)

HUMBUG.

Barnum said "The American People like to be humbugged." This may be true in the line of entertainment, but not where life is at stake. A man with consumption, or any lingering disease, looking death in the face and seeking to evade his awful grasp, does not like to be trifled with. So with confidence we place before our readers Nature's great remedy, Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery, a sure relief for that long train of diseases resulting from impure blood, such as Consumption, Chronic Nasal Catarrh, Liver Complaint, Kidney Disorder, Dyspepsia, Sick Headache, Scrofula and General Debility. Time-tried and thoroughly tested, it stands without an equal! Any druggist.

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