A GREAT MISTAKE.

"There is nothing to forgive,' said she simply. "You only accused me of carrying on a clandestine correspondence; and so I was. But I did not want Ada to know I was writing stories for money—it would have vexed her and poor aunt Letitia; and I thought if I had my letters sent to some little out-of-the-way place nobody would know. But, you see, you found me out."

There was that in the uplifted innocent eyes that compelled George March to take off his hat and stand bareheaded and humble in the frosty dusk before them.

"Oh, Chastete!" he quoted, under his breath; and his heart was full of a vague remorse and pain, as if he had hurt some helpless creature unawares. "Miss Thrale," he added aloud, "this omnibus is a long time coming; you see how dangerous it is to undertake such expeditions. Let us walk on, for it is getting late; and, as we walk, you tell me—won't you?—all about your stories and your editor. You know I am an old, old friend of Miss Throgmorton's; and, if you want me to feel that you don't quite consider me a blundering idiot, you will let me help you to some less difficult way than this of managing your business."

"Don't laugh at me!" pleaded Lucy, almost inclined to cry again. "I haven't any business. I only write little stories for the magazines."

"Only. Why, I think you are very clever to be able to write them, and doubly clever to be able to sell them. I am not laughing at you one bit.

"Really?"—Lucy's face brightened ingenuously. "I was afraid you were. You look rather stern and cold, you know; and I like to be liked. I can't bear to be suspected and frowned at."

"Tell the truth always then," said George, with something of the girl's simplicity, "and have done with concealments in future."

"Very well," said Lucy obediently.

"And promise me, above all, that you will not walk out so late again. I cannot understand Mrs. Ludlow's allowing it!"—with a frown.

Lucy turned a little pale.

"You are not going to tell aunt Letitia, Doctor March?" she urged, alarmed. "If I promise you, that ought to be enough. I never break a promise."

The young man looked at her for a moment or two. The anxious blue eyes did not flinch from his gaze.

"I will trust you," he answered quietly.

"And," Lucy went on, blushing now and hesitating, "you won't speak so unkindly to me any more?"

"Not if you are a good girl."

"Oh, I'll keep my word! And—and I beg your pardon for being so rude. I have a very bad temper, I know; and you did provoke me. Now didn't you?"

"I suppose I did," admitted the young man, smiling. "But now we are friends, aren't we?"

"Oh, yes!" she cried, nodding eagerly. "At least"—she paused faltering and confused—"not exactly friends; but we can always be polite to each other when we meet."

George smiled.

"Is that all?" he asked. "Why won't you let me be your friend, Miss Thrale?"

"I—I don't want any friend but Bee, thank you."

And just then the tardy omnibus came rumbling along.

"I will put you inside," said Doctor March—"I am afraid you are very cold—and I will indulge myself with a cigarette on the top. No; no protestations, please! I really must see you safely inside the green gate. I will go no farther unless you wish."

Lucy looked relieved. The pretty face nodded brightly through the closing door.

"Poor child!" thought George March, as he climbed up to his seat. "I am afraid she needs a friend. What a quaint little puzzle she is! That is a nasty cough she has, by the way; I must speak to Mrs. Ludlow about it. She must not be allowed to wander about in all kinds of weather." And he added once more, with a smile and a sigh, "Poor child!"

Chapter XXVII.

By Lucy's particular desire, Maria had kept the secret of their school from Doctor March, and, as to the children and to the other lodgers in the dingy courts at the North End, Bee and her friend were known only as "the ladies," George remained for some time in ignorance of their good work.

On Christmas Eve the children got their promised glimpse of fairy land, and the two girls stole an hour in the afternoon to look at the tree and at the little things' faces.

Bee and Lucy had agreed that there were to be no "useful presents" on their tree. Warm little garments and woolen socks and stout boots were not lacking to their six little scholars; but who wanted to see such things grow out of the magic bows of a Christmas tree?

No. There let sugar plums glisten and tinsel and tapers shine as brightly, for little eyes to which the world had hitherto been painted in drabs and brown, as they would shine in so many happy homes that week for other and more fortunate baby eyes.

So the room was decorated in a splendid manner with evergreens and hollyberries, and calico roses of home manufacture; a big wholesome cake was baked, dishes were piled with apples and oranges; and in the center of the room, in its green wooden tub, stood the tree—not a very big tree, perhaps, but it glittered as bravely and was as generously decked as the tallest in Barlaston Regis.

Maria's new chair, to the purchase of which Ted Ackroyd's sovereign had been duly devoted, was made as fine as any queen's throne; and the lame girl wore Bee's gift, a warm dress of crimson merino, with a degree of pride that she could not hide from her pupil's eyes.

"Pretty Maria!" said Kitty and Anastasia and all the wee dots. That patch of bright color would be a pleasure to their baby sight all the winter through.

The days being short and the guests small, the festivities began at an early hour.

"I wish we had room for a dozen more," sighed Lucy, while little appetites were being appeased—by means of a short process—and little pockets filled with the fragments of the feast. "There were so many longing little faces hovering about the stairs, Bee, as we came up!"

The distribution of the presents was followed by a general dance round the dismantled tree, the pink and blue tapers of which were already burning low.

Only Maria could not join; but she sang louder than anyone else in the nursery rhyme which Lucy started and she declared that Anatasia Perry danced for her as well as for herself.

At last it was time for the ladies to go. And then Lucy called the children round her, and a little hush fell on the room.

"There is something I want to say," she began quietly, taking baby Kitty on her lap. "We have all had a happy day, haven't we, my chicks?"

"Yes—yes," shouted the children.

"We have been quite warm and snug in here together—not felt the frost and cold outside, because of the good fire, nor hungry, because of Maria's big cake?"

"No—no!" responded the tiny chorus, fixing its six pairs of solemn eyes on Lucy's face.

"Well, then, don't you think we ought to remember some other little children who have not been so happy this Christmas Eve?"

The children listened, hardly comprehending.

"I mean that, as our room is so small, and we could not ask in all the little girls and boys who would have liked to see the tree, and Maria and the lady and I have saved some little presents for them, which are to be given them to-morrow; and I want to know what our little children will give me out of their share for some poorer little children we all know?"

On the wall over the fire-place was hung a simple German print of the divine Madonna and Child of the Dresden Gallery, and Lucy looked up at it now.

"If the Child Jesus were here Himself, cold and hungry among us," she went on in a very low voice, "would you give Him something out of your share children?"

"Yes!" cried the babies joyfully. Lucy's little sermon did not frighten them—it was so gently spoken, and with such friendly smiles.

"Well, you know Maria has read to you that if you give it to the poorest little child in Primrose Alley, it will be the same as giving it to Him. Maria will keep all the pieces in her apron for you—they will be the Child Jesus's share, remember!"

As the two girls stood side by side, and very still and silent somehow, while six little hands—some less willingly than others perhaps—broke off portions of the good things that had been given them to carry away, and laid them in the lame girl's lap, the door was seen to be half open, and Bee gently touched Lucy's arm to draw her attention to the fact.

"Come in, please!" that practical little person said at once. "We have a window open, and you are keeping the children in a draught!"

The invitation was accepted, and the intruder proved to be a gentleman, his coat and beard sprinkled with snow, who was holding by the hand a child of about the age of Maria's oldest scholar. She was poorly clad, and her feet were bare.

"Doctor March!" cried the lame girl as George advanced, taking off his hat, and bringing the child into their midst.

The two young ladies, starting back, saw themselves discovered. The Doctor took very little notice of them.

"This child's mother has just been taken to the hospital," he said. "She has been run over, and cannot live many hours. Will you give the little girl a bed for to-night, Maria?"

Maria looked at the child and then at Miss Thrale.

"I think you can manage, Maria," said Miss Thrale quietly, answering the look. "It is time for the little ones to go home. I will help you to wash and dress her. We have some clothes left that will fit her very well."

Maria brightened with interest and sympathy.

"And so we have," she said.

"I do not beg pardon for disturbing you," the young man went on, turning to the two girls. "If I understand your Christmas party at all, it is meant for me and my forlorn orphan here as well as for the rest. Children"—he raised his voice cheerfully—"here is a hungry little girl; her name is Nelly, and she has no father or mother. What was this young lady telling you just now about the Child Christ's share? Who will be the first to give their piece of cake?"

Six little hands were immediately stretched out with as many pieces of cake, two of which were seized by the half starved child, who began to eat ravenously, biting huge mouthfuls off each in turn, as if dreading that one might be taken from her.

"Miss Thrale, that is my Christmas box to you," said George March smiling and holding out his hand. "Do you forgive me for making so sad a one?"

Lucy put her hand simply in his.

"I am glad you could trust us," she answered, pulling Bee forward as partner in the business. "Nelly is one of our little scholars from to-day. We will make room for her somehow."

The girls would have remained, late as it was, to help Maria, but the Doctor interfered.

"I am going to send you both home," he said. "It is beginning to snow, and I think we shall have a heavy fall. No rebellion, Miss Throgmorton, if you please"—he was helping Bee rather awkwardly to put on her fur cloak. "I will deep your secret if you will do as I tell you. Is that a bargain? To think that I have been so completely mystified by two children like you!"

The girls laughed mischievously, and Lucy's laugh ended in a short cough.

"Now for your wrap, Miss Thrale," said the Doctor, looking at her suddenly as he heard this.

But Lucy had already struggled hurriedly into her jacket, and declined his help with a pretty bright blush.

"I shall have to order you to take better care of yourself, I see," George added quietly; "you are not properly clad at all for such a day as this."

"Oh, I am quite warm, thank you!" declared Lucy, quickly, apparently unaware that she was putting her glove on inside out.

"And since when have you had that cough?"

"I?" She looked up like a child accused of a fault. "Have I a cough, Doctor March? I never think about it; it will go away of itself."

And then everybody said "Good-bye" all round. Lucy stooped down when it came to Nelly's turn, and laid her hand on the orphan's tangled red head.

"Be a good girl," she said, "and do what Maria tells you, and you shall have a doll like the others to-morrow. I promise you. After which she kissed the astonished child simply on the cheek.

"When the three visitors got down the narrow staircase, Bee paused at the door to take Lucy in her arms and smother her with impetuous kisses.

"Bee," the girl exclaimed, laughing, "what is the meaning of this sudden burst of affection?"

"To think of your kissing that dreadful dirty little object!" cried Bee hysterically. "I could not—I could not!"

"I did not see the dirt," said Lucy wistfully. "Her sorrows had washed it all away. And now I must make haste home. It is not snowing very fast. Good bye, Bee, good-bye, Doctor March."

She was gathering up her gray skirts, evidently intending to dart on by herself though the snowy streets. Bee arched her eyebrows.

"Do you really suppose," she demanded calmly, "That you are going home in that fashion?"

"What has become of the carriage?" asked Doctor March. "You did not walk here, I hope, as I did?"

"But indeed we did," declared Bee ruefully. "Lucy is always so glad of the fresh air that—good gracious, it is five o'clock!" she added, looking at her watch by the light of a street lamp before the door. "We had better walk on until we come to a cab, and then you can put us in, and I will drive to King's Road with Lucy."

"Or, better still," suggested the Doctor, with a glance at Miss Thrale's old jacket, "I will send David Perry in search of the cab, if he is at home. Wait a moment."

The young man rushed up the dingy staircase three steps at a time, and Bee sat down, laughing resignedly, in the open doorway, where the snow was drifting in lightly.

"Bee, do let me go now!" pleaded Lucy hurriedly. "I am afraid Ada will miss me; and I don't mind walking by myself at all."

"But I mind it for you very much," cried Bee decisively. "See, here comes Doctor March with David; we shall be all right now."

David, having gained the young ladies and pulled his forelock, darted off through the snow with a whoop of enjoyment. There was nothing for it, Lucy saw, but to submit; and one of the results of the Christmas party was a very pleasant stolen quarter of an hour spent in the dilapidated passage of the house in Primrose Alley.

George found a corner for Lucy out of the draught and contented himself with a seat on the stairs near Bee, who was giving him an animate account of their school and its origin. Indeed Bee had all the talking to herself, for Lucy could hardly be coaxed into saying a word, as she sat in her dusky corner with anxious eyes fixed on the fast falling snow, and the Doctor was listening with pleased attention to Miss Throgmorton's explanations.

"I must ask Miss Thrale for her secret," he said kindly, when the warm hearted girl had partly exhausted the subject. "I should like to know how she has contrived to interest my dear old Bee in such sensible and womanly work, while all my efforts in the same direction have been fruitless."

He was looking at Lucy as he spoke, but she did not answer. Bee colored hotly, remembering the sorrow that had sent her to Lucy for help; then she spoke up bravely for her friend.

"One would hardly expect it, would they," she asked, "of such a desperate and heartless coquette as Miss Thrale? She ought to have taught me to flirt instead."

And now Lucy's cheeks rivalled Miss Throgmorton's.

"Oh, Bee!" she whispered, in distressful entreaty.

"Well?"—sturdily. "That is what they all say of you, you poor little thing! And you shall flirt as much as you like at the ball. It will be your turn to dance then, and I hope you will enjoy it as much as our babies did to-day."

Lucy smiled a little wistfully.

The cab was jolting down the narrow and ill paved street now, with David running before as a pilot, and the little talk in the hall came to an end.

Doctor March was going back to the hospital, and had no time for a cigarette; so the two girls drove off by themselves to King's Road, very cold and hungry and happy.

"It is all settled about your dress, of course?" Bee asked when they were drawing near the villa.

"Oh, quite!"

"I am so glad!" In a little estacy she kissed the pretty face, a bump of the cab crushing both their hats during the ceremony, and making them laugh with pure lightness of heart. "I was afraid Ada might have thought it a little expensive."

"For my first ball?" questioned Lucy demurely. "No, indeed; I have carte blanche to think of the prettiest ball dress that money can buy! And nothing can be prettier than white tulle—can it?"

"Well, I hope it won't be torn to tatters! Has Doctor March asked you to keep him any dances yet?"

"What an idea!" protested Lucy, reddening. "I would not dance with him for all the world."

"Indeed!" said Bee calmly. "There will be all the more fun for me. George March waltzes superbly."

"Susan says your brother is here," Lucy cried, running back through the snow to the cab window after the door of the villa had been opened.

"Jack? Is he? Then he had better drive home with me. I will come in for a minute."

Lucy went straight up stairs to take off her hat, and Miss Throgmorton followed Susan to the back drawing room.

She found Jack there, sitting on a stool near Miss Ludlow's feet, from which he started up as his sister entered, looking somewhat confused.

Miss Ludlow, gentle and unembarrassed, rose to receive her visitor. There was no light in the room except the pleasant flicker of the fire, and the soft gloom was filled as usual with the fragrance of flowers.

"Come to the fire, Bee," she said, putting out both her hands prettily. "Your brother has just began to thaw. Is it not bitterly cold?"

Bee's bright face had undergone a sudden eclipse.

"Did mamma send you for me, Jack," she asked abruptly, "or haven't you been home yet?"

Jack colored and plunged both hands into his pockets, kicking at a reel of cotton that had fallen on the floor as he went and leant against the mantel piece.

"No," he answered with elaborate carelessness, but not meeting his sister's eyes; "I have not been home yet."

"Oh, I must scold you for that," declared Miss Ludlow, smiling; "only I believe you guessed that Bee would be here! Are you admiring my flowers, Bee?" A magnificent nosegay stood on the velvet covered table at the speaker's elbow. "Let me give you one for your hair. Indeed I wish you would take them all. They have no business here."

"No, thank you," was the curt reply. Miss Throgmorton still held aloof from the fire, and from the easy chair which Ada had wheeled forward for her. "Is Mrs. Ludlow in the front room?" she added. "May I go in and speak to her this evening?"

"Of course; we left her because she had fallen into a doze. She will be so glad to see you."

"Shall you be ready to go home then, Jack?" asked Bee, pausing between the curtains and looking back. "It is snowing very hard, and I have a cab ——"

"Yes, yes! Hang it all, don't bother a fellow!" he replied irritably.

"But, you must let me give you some tea first," Ada interposed with a charming smile. "Perhaps that may tend to civilize this great bear a little."

Jack followed his sister to the folding doors and watched her go into the other room; then he came back eagerly to Miss Ludlow's side and stood before her, agitated and pale.

"Is that all you will say to me?" he asked in a low voice, continuing their interrupted conversation.

Ada looked up, her large serious eyes full of a gentle reproach.

"What else can I say!" she pleaded. "If you do not wish to make me very unhappy, you will never allude to this again."

"Give me some reason," urged the boy. "Do you think I will submit meekly to be treated like a child—to have my flowers refused——"

"I have not refused these," reasoned Ada gently, touching the white petals with her lips. "I have only begged you not to bring me any more."

"That is my business," he cried. "No one shall interfere with my affairs!"

"Not even me?"—smiling up into the angry dark face.

"Oh, you, Ada. You can do whatever you like with me—you know you can."

"Except make you listen to reason."

"That means that you will not marry me? Well"—with a bitter sigh—"I don't say you are wrong. I am not much of a fellow, I know."

"Please don't run down my friend, Mr. Throgmorton!" Ada's voice sank to a whisper; she was making palpable blunders in her work.

Jack saw it, and he drew nearer and bent over the little flaxen head.

"Ada," he said in a hurried whisper, "can you—you do not care for me? It will be kinder to say so at once. I will never trouble you any more, and I will be your freind still whatever happens."

Miss Ludlow dropped her embroidery, and sank back in her chair. She was trembling and catching the corner of her lips between her teeth.

"Yes it will be better so," she said brokenly.

"I think you will be very wise to forget me, Jack."

"Now you speak like that" Eagerly—"Ada, you care for me! It is my father you are afraid of, isn't it? But if you give yourself to me I would work; we need not be dependent on him." He caught her slim white hand in his two boyish palms, and gripped it close. "Ada," he urged, "you do care for me!"

Ada drew her hand away and stood up.

"Is this fair?" she asked reproachfully, crossing to the fireplace and putting one hand up on the tall chimneypeice. "Have I not already told you my descision? It is cruel to persist."

"You have not said that you cannot love me!" exclaimed the boy in a passionate whisper. He followed her and stood behind her, with his eager lips bent down to her shrinking ear. "Until you say that, I shall never stop hoping. Ada, you dare not say it!"

She caught at the back of a chair near which she stood and pressed one hand to her bosom.

"Do you think it is so easy for a woman to give pain?" she murmured almost inaudibly. "Why cannot we be friends without speaking any such words at all?"

"You dare not say them!" repeated the lad, with a fond and triumphant laugh.

"Dare not!" Miss Ludlow drew her slender figure up to its fullest height and was about to speak; but suddenly she flushed, melted, trembled. "I—I do not love you," she said in faltering words that died on her lips as she spoke them.

Jack seized her in his arms and broke into some fond wild murmur; but she disengaged herself gently but firmly, and put him from her.

"Ungenerous!" she whispered, faintly. "Have I not said that I—I do not love you?"

Baffled and bewildered, the boy caught up his hat and strode to the door.

"That is enough," he muttered, hoarsely; "you need not say it twice."

"You are not angry?" pleaded Ada, holding out two shaking white hands. "We are friends still at least?"

"Friends!" He broke into a scornful laugh. "You mean that I am still a fool and your slave, and that you can whistle me back to-morrow if you like! I won't trouble you any longer now however. Good night."

"But your sister Bee!" cried Miss Ludlow in a distressed whisper. "Won't you wait and—"

Something like a smothered oath answered her; and a moment later the slamming of the hall door announced that Jack was gone.

Chapter XXVIII.

A robin singing his Christmas carol in a holly bush below her window was the first sound that greeted Lucy next morning.

She jumped out of bed feeling very bright and very happy. Christmas Day was Christmas Day; there was no changing that, no matter how lonely you might be, or how few presents you might receive. The sun was shining frostily, bells would soon be ringing.

"I wonder what Susan said this morning when she opened her eyes and saw her new aprons," thought Lucy gaily.

Her white childish arms shone in the morning light as she stood at her humble toilet table braiding the rough pretty abundance of her bronze hair and singing between every dexterous turn and twist vague snatches of a little canticle Bee was fond of—

"Peuple, a genoux! Attends ta delivrance,
Noel, Noel! Voici le Redempteur!

"I wonder how our little scholars are today. I hope indigestion has not waited on appetite, poor little trots. How kind Doctor March was. I am not a bit afraid of him now; and I don't wonder that Ada likes him. At—least—yes, I think she does, though she will not admit it just yet. I don't wonder; he is not a bit good looking, but he is strong and gentle and considerate. Oh, I think Ada will be very happy with him. There—I am ready. I will just run down and see that breakfast is all right."

She had fastened her blue stuff gown with a little bunch of holly berries; they pricked her chin, but Lucy persisted on wearing them as the one compliment, besides her light heart, which she was able to pay Father Christmas; and, as she paused to smooth away an imaginary wrinkle from the round beauty of her; little waist, it was not at all surprising that she should linger a few moments at the glass, putting her head on one side to look at the charming reflection it gave back.

"It's a shame there's no one to see your berries, poor Lucy," she said, addressing the childish beauty in the glass, who smiled back at her with a red rose mouth; "they really look very pretty. There"—bending forward and kissing the laughing lips in the glass—"a merry Christmas, Miss Thrale! There's one kiss for you, you poor little thing! And kisses don't grow on every holly brush this Christmas, let me tell you!"

Then she ran off down stairs singing again "Noel, Noel!" to wish Susan too a merry Christmas, and to hear the white aprons extolled over and over again.

"If you please, Miss Lucy," said Susan at last, "there's some things in the parlor as came this morning."

Lucy rushed into the breakfast room.

The round table was piled indeed with a formidable array of packages, and, to the girl's astonishment, her pile was the largest of the three. It had actually overflowed her plate and filled up her chair, on which she found a large square parcel like a box, covered with brown paper, addressed to "Miss Thrale, Tower House, King's road."

Lucy's fingers fairly tingled to be at the packages; but she would not touch a single knot till Ada and her aunt came down. Besides, it was pleasure enough to stand and look at them, wondering who had sent them and what they could contain.

"One is from Bee, I am sure!" she thought gladly. "How good she has been to me ever since that day! But I shall scold her. Does she suppose I want presents to convince me of her love?"

Mrs. Ludlow's feeble steps were heard on the stairs at last, and Lucy sprang to open the door, her eyes and lips bright with Christmas greetings.

The pale invalid, who was leaning on her daughter's arm, seemed to shrink back at sight of the radiant young creature whose flower-like coloring made all other faces look so dull and faded.

The sunshine was turning Lucy's rough bronze hair to gold; it was lighting up the white bloom of her skin, and accentuating the dark and delicate brows above her sweet blue eyes. She was a sight, in her stuff gown and and her bunch of scarlet berries, "to make an old man young," and her beauty struck the watching women with fresh force.

Lucy did not understand the little pause.

"Oh, aunt Letitia," she cried, coloring, "you will take me in your arms to day and kiss me. Ah, do, darling! I have no mother to say merry Christmas to me, you know! So you will just for once—won't you?"

She had her arms round the widow's shrinking figure, and was clinging close to her, reless of poor Mrs. Ludlow's pale cold face. There was very little proper spirit in Lucy, evidently

"Of course you will kiss Lucy, mamma," Ada said kindly. "That is right." And her mother did touch Lucy's cheek with her lips and lay her hand for an instant on her shoulder.

"Lucy is as fond of kissing as a baby!" she said half fretfully, as she sank into her low chair by the fire.

Lucy only laughed, and arranged the footstool under her aunt's feet and the pillow at her back.

"There are such a delightful lot of presents, aunt Letitia," she exclaimed in irrepressible good humor.

Ada was looking in some curiosity at the parcels.

"I did not expect a single thing," she declared, taking up the box and cutting the string. "What can this huge thing be?"

The box proved to contain a handsome seal skin jacket and muff, at sight of which Lucy's eyes began to shine.

"How provoking!" Ada cried. "I have an excellent set already."

Lucy blushed.

"I—I think it is meant for me, Ada." she said; and her cousin, taking up the paper again, looked at the address.

"So it is! how stupid of me! Dear Lucy, I am so glad. It is just what you wanted. I suppose it is from Bee. Put it on at once, and let us see if it fits. Look, mamma! Is it not handsome?"

"Is it not rather an expensive present for Lucy to accept?" objected Mrs. Ludlow, with an uneasy glance at the sweet flushed face that rose above the dark fur, all in a glow of happy excitement.

"Oh, aunt Letitia, please don't say so!" cried Lucy, who was stroking the sleeve with her hand. "I don't think I could bear to give it up."

"You will do as you please, of course," said the widow, coldly. "You generally do."

Lucy began quietly to unbotton the jacket.

"I will do whatever you think best, aunt Letitia," she answered gently, though there was a tell tale quiver in her voice. "After all the worst of the winter is over; I do not care so very much about it."

"I am sorry that we cannot afford to buy you fur jackets," retorted poor Mrs. Ludlow, in whose eyes even fresh beauty in the young creature before her was a fresh wrong done to her own child. "For that however it is not Ada who is to blame, though I never hear her complaining of our poverty."

Lucy took off the jacket, folded it, and placed it in its box. Her old enemy—her quick temper—was rising, and she would not trust herself to speak just then.

"Lucy knows at least that we would buy them for her if we could, mamma," interposed Ada in her silvery voice, as she went on opening the parcels. "Look—here is a cosy crimson shawl which Lucy has knitted you; and I have some pretty handkerchiefs—they are just what I wanted, dear"—to her cousin with a smile. "And what is this? Oh, what a delicious locket! My name in diamonds on a dead gold ground! Who can have sent me this? Not a scrap of writing—no! Let me look inside. Only a few rose leaves! How very odd!"

"Oh, that means," said Lucy, recovering herself and taking her seat at the table, "that it comes from your good fairy, of course—the flower person you know, Ada."

"Oh, but flowers are one thing, and diamonds are another!" answered Miss Ludlow gravely. "I shall certainly not accept this in any such anonymous fashion."

"It is not hard to guess who has sent it," declared Mrs. Ludlow, her wan face lighting up proudly. Was not everything to be settled at the ball? Mary Throgmorton said so; and that harm could there be in a present from the one to whom Ada was as good as engaged?" "Of course you will keep it, my love?"

But Ada shook her head.

Meanwhile Lucy had discovered that Bee's present was a pretty lace handkerchief for the ball, that young Ackroyd had sent his idol's friend a charming white fan to match it, and Mr. Throgmorton—his daughter's unresisting victim—a box of gloves both light and dark.

"Upon my word," exclaimed Mrs. Ludlow, as these treasures were displayed by the happy child, "you have made good use of your time in Upper Brunswick street, I must say!"

Lucy hung her head.

"It is all through Bee, aunt Letitia"—with a wistful little air of apology. "They do it only to please her, and——. Oh!"

As she unfolded the lace handkerchief, the better to admire its delicate pattern, a letter fell into her lap. It was addressed to "The Ladies," in a broad picturesque hand, and contained a five pound note and a slip of paper, on which was written. "For Nellie, until something can be decided upon.—G. M."

Lucy's happy smiles all faded as soon as she saw this. If George had had the faintest idea of the trouble he was bringing upon the poor child, he would have cut off his hand rather than have written these few words. She sat and stared at the note, while Ada was still busy with her own and her mother's presents, until the words seemed to be written in scarlet ink; and her heart beat like a drum as she tried to swallow her breakfast and to look as if nothing had happened. But Lucy had a tell-tale face.

"Have you had a letter too, Lucy?" Miss Ludlow asked, surprised at her cousin's sudden silence.

The widow was still carefully examining the locket, which was of considerable value, the stones being of good size and color.

"N-no—not exactly a letter," stammered Lucy, letting her knife and fork fall with a startled clatter. "At least—I mean—it is from Doctor March!"

She blurted out the words and sat bolt upright, awaiting the storm which would doubtless break upon her head.

"From Doctor March!" gasped Mrs. Ludlow in shrill amazement, as soon as she could speak. "Well of all the——"

Ada laid her hand gently on her mother's arm.

"Hush, pray, mamma!" she said. "Why may not Lucy receive a present from Doctor March as well as from Mr Throgmorton? The Doctor is like one of the family."

"It is not a present," explained Lucy in great confusion—"and it is not for me."

"Not for you?"

The widow brightened.

"No, aunt Letitia." Poor Lucy colored painfully. "It is only some money, and it is for our school."

The cherished secret was dragged from her at last, and all the disappointment and pent up excitement of the morning melted into a great burst of sobbing and tears, which Lucy tried vainly to control. Miss Ludlow waited until it was exhausted—the widow was herself crying silently behind her pocket handkerchief—and then, very gently and with the most patient kindness, she begged Lucy to explain the matter to them.

"You know, dear Lucy, we have your real interests at heart, and mamma is afraid that you may have been led, thoughtlessly into some little imprudence. You will admit that it does not look very well to be receiving presents of money from a gentleman?"

Thus appealed to, Lucy told the history of the little school in Primrose Alley, and of her meeting there on the previous night with Doctor March.

"He never came there before," she added eagerly. "Only Bee and I knew about it."

There was a pause. Mrs. Ludlow dried her eyes and sat up.

"I told you how it would be, my poor love," she said hysterically. "You would not listen to me, and now——"

"Mamma," urged her daughter in tender reproach, "you knew Doctor March has forbidden you to excite yourself; and you wrong Lucy. I am sure of that, if she had thought you would disapprove of what she was doing—"

"I shall speak to Mary about it!" the widow cried angrily. "I am sure she will not allow Bee to be mixed up in anything of that sort, and all for the sake of meeting—"

"Mamma," pleaded Miss Ludlow, pray do not give way! I know Lucy better than you do. I am quite sure that a word from you will be enough. She will give up this little fancy to please you. It was very kind and sweet of her to do good among the poor; but she will sacrifice her own inclinations for your sake, you will see."

Lucy stood up, pained and chilled and heavy-eyed.

"Very well," she said quietly. "I will tell Bee, and she can give the money back to Doctor March. I did not mean to deceive you, aunt Letitia. Only Bee and I did not think there was any harm in a secret like that. I could not have asked you to kiss me to day if I had meant any harm.

She rushed away to her own room, there to fling herself down in the bed in a passion of anger and pain. She was a very faulty little creature, no doubt, and her temper often ran away with her; but it did seem that she had not deserved such a black cloud of disapprobation and suspicion as had darkened the Christmas sunshine already.

"What can I do with my life now?" She thought. "Am I never to be loved, never to love any one, even the poor little ragged children that nobody wants? Oh, I am sorry! It made me very happy to work for them! And Doctor March will be sorry too. He did not mean to cause us any pain; he only meant to be kind. Oh, I wish it had not happened this morning! It will be such a miserable Christmas Day!"

Chapter XXIX.

When Miss Ludlow knocked an hour later at her cousin's door, the face that met her, tear stained, flushed, quivering, was very different from the morning face that had sung Noel in the sunshine.

Miss Ludlow was charmingly dressed in black velvet, with a little bonnet to correspond that contrasted very effectively with her abundant flaxen hair. She was drawing on a fresh pair of the long gloves that had excited Bee's wrath, and looked as calm and as cool as a lily.

It had been arranged that Mrs. Ludlow would attempt to go to St. Chad's for morning service, and would drive from there with Mrs. Throgmorton to Upper Brunswick street, where she and her daughter were to dine.

A very formal invitation had likewise been extended to Miss Thrale; but this, in spite of Bee's indignant protest, Lucy had felt it impossible to accept.

"But you cannot dine by yourself on Christmas Day!" cried the warm hearted girl. "Nobody ever heard of such a thing."

"I shall have a plum pudding all to myself," Lucy had answered, laughing at her friend's distress, though with very misty blue eyes and unsteady lips. "Dear Bee, don't I know how glad you would be to have me? But I cannot go; and you must not think of it any more. I shall be happy in my own way, I dare say."

But now, when she saw her cousin ready to go, and remembered the long dull day that lay before her, the poor child's heart sank within her.

"Dear Lucy," Ada said very kindly, "how I wish you were going. Had you not better change you mind, late as it is, and come with us?"

Lucy shook her head with a melancholy smile.

"I hope you have not been fretting about what dear mamma said at breakfast? It was for your good, dear. You know I do not offen side against you; do I? But this time I am afraid I must say that mamma is right. There—give me a kiss, and promise me to take good care of yourself. We shall be home quite early, of course, on our dear invalid's account."

Before many minutes Lucy heard the carriage roll away, and knew that she was alone for the rest of the day.

She went to church; but the happy faces she saw all round her within the dingy walls of St Mark's made her very sad, and she could not eat any dinner, sitting all by herself in the little dining room, with Susan to wait upon her.

She had hardly the heart to speak to the assiduous little maid; but she did muster up a small joke, so that Susan should not suspect how miserable she was; and then, creeping into the back drawing room, already darkening with the early twilight, she seated herself on the sofa with her presents, and before long fell fast asleep, the fan and gloves and lace handkerchief still in her hands.

Susan crept in once or twice to look to the fire; but the poor child did not wake. She was dreaming of her dead mother whom she could hardly remember—dreaming that she had spoken her name in a voice like music and kissed her—when she awoke with a start to find Bee Throgmorton kneeling beside her, bright and eager and pretty in her fur cap and cloak.

"Oh!" cried Lucy, starting up and throwing two convulsive arms round her friend's neck. "Oh, Bee, I was dreaming of being kissed! I thought it was my mother!"

The two girls clung to each other for a moment in silence; then Bee spoke, laying her cold cheek against Lucy's feverish head.

"Look!" she said. "Sit up and receive your guests, Miss Thrale! I have brought you quite a party!"

Lucy stared sleepily—not comprehending—round the firelitany room.

"It was all Bee's fault, my dear," said Mr. Throgmorton, coming forward and holding out a kind hand. "Nothing would do but we must come; and so we brought Mr. Ackroyd with us, and Doctor March, whom we met on the way."

Lucy turned pale. Oh, what new scrape had she got into? she wondered breathlessly; and what in the world possessed Doctor March to pay visits on Christmas Day? She forgot that she had to play hostess in her cousin's absence; she looked a very bashful and awkward little person indeed.

"I will pour out the tea, if that is what you are afraid of," said Bee, laughing, and throwing off her cloak." "I will even ring the bell and order it, if you will give me leave."

And then Lucy, remembering that she could not very well turn the Doctor out, no matter how undesirable his presence might be, determined to make the best of it, and began to prepare the tea with an eager delight that was quite irresistible.

"What fun!" she cried, laughing up at George March as he brought her the big kitchen-kettle which she had been obliged to order in.

"It is like playing at house," the young man said, watching her very kindly while she marshalled her cups and saucers around her. "I expect you to call me 'Lord George' every moment and to offer me a mud-pie."

"I could not make any now," Lucy answered laughing. "They are all buried under the snow;" then her attention became concentrated on the tea pot, which was somewhat heavy for her slender wrist.

"I am going to play for you all," said Miss Throgmorton after a while; and young Ackroyd followed her to the piano. Mr. Throgmorton was already dozing over the fire; he had found a chair which reminded him of his favorite seat at home.

George drew his nearer to the pretty teamaker. She was looking more than pretty just then. He wondered how he ever have believed anything had about a girl with such a fair and ingenuous face.

Lucy had been listening to Bee's music, with her hands folded in the lap of her blue gown, but she looked up, starting a little as the young man sat down beside her, and drew her skirt out of his way.

"Bee allows people to talk through her music," he said, smiling. "She knows how well worth listening to it is, and can afford to be magnanimous."

"Bee is the most generous girl in all the world!" said Lucy with simple and quiet enthusiasm; and, seizing the opportunity for an explanation, she added in a very low voice, so low that Doctor March had to bend over the pretty bronze head to hear, "I am very sorry I shall not be able to go to the school any more—I shall be wanted at home; so you will please to give the money to Bee for Nelly? It was very kind of you to remember us."

"Not go to the school any more?" repeated George, as she took the fatal envelope from the pocket of her stuff gown. Why ——" But something in the downcast face at his side checked him. He put the note, doubled up, into his waistcoat pocket. "I will speak to Bee," he said quietly "But first I have something to say to you—something very mysterious and important."

Lucy looked at him, startled, but smiling too.

"To me?"

"To you, Miss Thrale—or no; not to you—to Lucius Trevelyan, Esq., if he will favor me with a few moments' conversation."

Lucius Trevelyan, Esq., began to blush with all her might.

TO BE CONTINUED.

—Within thirty-seven years the Church of England has erected 2,581 churches, and expended on church buildings $200,900,000.

MRS. LINCOLN'S WHIMS.

Her Illness Chiefly a Figment of Her Imagination.

(Chicago News.)

Mrs. Lincoln came to Springfield on November 3, 1880, and has since made her home at the residence of Hon. Ninan Edwards, whose wife is her sister, where she has been tenderly cared for. The most noticeable feature connected with her arrival was the extraordinary amount of baggage which she brought with her. This consisted of over 60 trunks, which, according to the railroad officials, weighed about 8,000 pounds. In these trunks is contained a remarkable collection of ordinary possessions of the most miscellaneous character, comprising almost everything in the shape of clothing, trinkets, etc., that she had accumulated since childhood, all of which she treasures with zealous care. Since coming to Springfield it has been Mrs. Lincoln's pleasure to consider herself hopelessly ill—a confirmed invalid, without the slightest chance of recovery. About a month after her arrival she shut herself up in her room, professing to be unable even to go down stairs. And there she remained persistently from last Christmas until Wednesday of this week. Her most frequent expressions were that she was on fire, and that she felt as though she was being cut to pieces by knives. Her greatest gratification was to read the newspaper statements that she was lying at the point of death These were carefully collected for her, and she seemed to desire that the news should be circulated as widely as possible. Mrs. Lincoln often spent the morning looking through her collection of trunks, occasionally fishing out some dilapidated garment and mending it carefully.

In the afternoon it has been Mrs. Lincoln's habit to darken her room as much as possible. She has decided to use gas except when visitors called, and has preferred to obtain what little light she needed from ordinary candles or from tapers floating in water. During all these imaginary troubles Mrs. Lincoln's appetite has been good. Through these months she has always slept well, and a great deal, though she has strenuously insisted that she has not. Recently she sent for her physician and said that she had hardly slept all winter. She wanted something to make her sleep, but did not want anything that had an opiate in it. The doctor complied with her request, and she slept nearly all the time for three days, being very drowsy during the short intervals when she was awake. Since then she has admitted that she felt better. For some time the doctor has advised her to take a drive as soon as she was able to get out. After setting several days for making the attempt, she felt enough better after her long sleep to go, and not only took a drive on Wednesday of this week, but wants soon to take another. Mrs. Lincoln is not really sick. She does suffer from a slight trouble, causing the hysterical condition, and of course her general health has not been improved by her six months' confinement to her room and her general mode of life. But her sufferings are almost wholly imaginary, and she may at any time conclude that she has recovered. All of her fancies and whims are indulged in to the fullest extent by her friends, and this may be said to com