

... always honored and admired you. During the last hour I have learned to—to—will—to think you deserve more than honor and esteem. Any woman might be proud and happy—yes—happy to belong to you. But now, if I am to be your wife—don't interrupt. Well, as I am to be your wife, you must let me tell you everything—everything—or I recall my promise."

"Don't do that," he answered playfully. "But mind, I'm quite satisfied with you as you are, and ask to know nothing."

She hesitated, and the color came to her brow while she completed her confession. "You—you lent me some money, you know; gave it me, I ought to say, for I'm quite sure you never expected to see it back again. It was a good deal. Don't contradict. It was a good deal, and I wonder how I could have the face to ask for it. But I didn't want it for myself. It was to save from utter ruin a very old and dear friend."

"I know all about it," said he, cheerfully. "At least, I can guess. Very glad it should be so well employed. But all that was your business, not mine."

"And you never even asked who got it?" she continued, while again there gathered a mist to veil her large dark eyes.

"My dear Blanche," he answered, "I was only too happy to be of service to you. Surely it was your own, to employ as you liked. I don't want to know any more about it, even now."

"But you must know," she urged. "I've been going to tell you over so often, but something always interrupted us; and once, when I had almost got it out, the words seemed to die away on my lips. Listen. You know I'm not very young."

He bowed in silence. The reflection naturally presented itself that if she was not very young, he must be very old.

Miss Douglas proceeded, with her eyes fixed on her listener, as if she was looking at something a long way off.

"Of course I've seen and known lots of people in my life, and had great friends—I mean real friends—that I would have made any sacrifice to serve. Amongst these was Mr. Walters. I used to call him Daisy. General, I—I liked him better than all the rest. Better than anybody in the world—"

"And now?" asked the General anxiously, but carrying a bold front notwithstanding.

"Now, I know I was mistaken," she replied. "Though that's not the question. Well, after that horrid race—when my beautiful mare ought to have won, and didn't—I knew Daisy—Mr. Walters, I mean—had lost more than he could afford to pay—in plain English, he was ruined; and worse, wouldn't be able to show, unless somebody came to the rescue. I hadn't got the money myself. Not a hundredth part of it! So I asked you, and—and—sent it all to him. Now you know the whole business."

"I knew it long ago," said he gently. "At least, I might have known it, had I ever allowed the subject to enter my head. Does he know it too, do you think, Blanche?"

"Good heavens! No!" she exclaimed. "That would be a complication. You don't think there's a chance of it! I took every care—every precaution. What should I do? General, what would you advise?"

He smiled to mark how she was beginning to depend on him, drawing a good augury from this alteration in her character, and would no doubt have replied in exceedingly affectionate terms, but that he was interrupted by the opening of the drawing-room door, and entrance of a servant, who, in a matter-of-fact voice, announced a visitor—

"Mr. Walters!"

"Blanche turned white to her lips, and muttered rapidly, 'Won't you stay, General? Do!'"

But the General had already possessed himself of his hat, and, with an air of good-humored confidence, that she felt did honor

directly. Will you have the black mare to ride while you are in town? I've taken great care of her, and she's looking beautiful!"

To her own ear, if not to his, there was a catch in her breath while she spoke the last words, that warned her she would need all her self-command before the play was played out.

He thanked her kindly enough, while he declined the offer; but his tone was so grave, so sorrowful, that she could keep up the affection of levity no longer.

"What is it?" she asked, in an altered voice. "Daisy!—Mr. Walters! What is the matter? Are you offended? I was only joking about Norah."

"Offended!" he repeated. "How could I ever be offended with you? But I didn't come here to talk about Miss Macormac, nor even Satanella, except in so far as the mare is connected with your generosity and kindness."

"What do you mean?" she asked, in considerable trepidation. "You were the generous one, for you gave me the best hunter in your stable, without being asked."

As if you had not bought her over and over again!" he exclaimed, finding voice and words and courage now that he was approaching the important topic. "Miss Douglas, it's no use denying your good deeds, nor pretending to ignore their magnificence. It was only yesterday I learned the real name of my unknown friend! I tell you that money of yours saved me from utter ruin—worse than ruin, from such disgrace as if I had committed a felony, and been sent to prison!"

"I'm sure you look as if you had just come out of one," she interposed, "with that cropped head. Why do you let them cut your hair so short? It makes you hideous!"

"Never mind my cropped head," he continued, somewhat baffled by the interruption. "I hurried here at once, to thank you with all my heart, as the best friend I ever had in the world."

"Well, you've done it," said she. "That's quite enough. Now let us talk of something else."

"But I haven't done it," protested Daisy, gathering from the obstacles in his way, a certain inclination to his task or at least a determination to go through with it. "I haven't said half what I've got to say, nor a quarter of what I feel. You have shown that you consider me a near and dear friend. You have given me the plainest possible proof of your confidence and esteem. All this instigates me—or rather induces me, or shall I say, encourages me—to hope, or perhaps persuade myself of some probability. In short, Miss Douglas—can't you help a fellow out with what he's got to say?"

Floundering about in search of the right expressions, she would have liked him to go on for an hour. It was delightful to be even on the brink of that paradise from which she must presently exclude herself for ever with her own hands, and she forbore to interrupt him till he came to a dead stop for want of words.

"Nonsense!" she said. "Any friend would have done as much who had the power. It's nothing to make a fuss about. I'm glad you're out of the scrape, and there's an end of it."

"You are always generous," he exclaimed. "You ought to have been a man; I've said so a hundred times—only it's lucky you're not, or I couldn't ask you a question that I don't know how to put in the right form."

She turned pale as death. It was come, then, at last—that moment to which she had once looked forward as a glimpse of happiness too exquisite for mortal senses. Here was the enchanted cup pressed to her very lip, and she must not taste it—must even withdraw her eyes from the insidious drink. And yet even now she felt a certain sense of disappointment in her empty triumph, a vague misgiving that the proffered draught

hardly have betrayed deeper emotion had she been trembling in the balance between life and death.

That was a brave heart of hers, or it must have failed to keep its own rebellion down so firmly, and gather strength to answer in a calm, collected voice—

"There are some things it is better not to think about, for they can never be, and this is one of them."

How little she knew what was passing in his mind! How little she suspected that her sentence was his reprieve! And yet his self-love was galled. He had made a narrow escape, and was thankful, no doubt, but felt somewhat disappointed, too, that his danger had not been greater still.

"Do you mean it?" said he. "Well, you'll forgive my presumption, and—and—you won't forget I asked you."

"Forget!"

It was all she said; but a man must have been both blind and deaf not to have marked the tone in which those syllables were uttered, the look which accompanied them. Daisy brandished his hat, thinking it time to go, lest his sentence should be commuted, and his doom revoked.

She put her hand to her throat, as if she must choke; but mastered her feelings with an effort, forcing herself to speak calmly and distinctly now, on a subject that must never be approached again.

"Do you think I undervalue your offer," she said, gathering fortitude with every word; "do you think me changeable, or unfeeling. If you must not make me happy, at least you have made me very proud; and if everything had turned out differently, I do hope I might have proved worthy to be your wife. You're not angry with me, are you? And you won't hate me because it's impossible?"

"Not the least!" exclaimed Daisy, eagerly. "Don't think it for a moment! Please not to make yourself unhappy about me."

"I am worthy to be your friend," she continued, saddened, and it may be a little vexed by this remarkable exhibition of self-denial; "and as a friend I feel I owe you some explanation, beyond a bare 'No, I won't.' It ought rather to be 'No, I can't;' because—because, to tell you the honest truth, I have promised somebody else!"

"I wish you joy, with all my heart!" he exclaimed, gaily, and not the least like an unsuccessful suitor. "I hope you'll be as happy as the day is long! When is it to be? You'll send me an invitation to the wedding, won't you?"

Her heart was very sore. He did not even ask the name of his fortunate rival, and he could hardly have looked more pleased, she thought, if he had been going to marry her himself.

"I don't know about that," she answered, shaking her head sadly. "At any rate, I shall not see you again for a long time. Good-bye, Daisy," and she held out a cold hand that trembled very much.

"Good-bye," said he, pressing it cordially. "I shall never forget your kindness. Good-bye."

Then the door shut, and he was gone. Blanche Douglas sank into a sofa, and sat there looking at the opposite wall, without moving hand or foot, till the long summer's day waned into darkness and her servant came with lights. She neither wept, nor moaned, nor muttered broken sentences, but remained perfectly motionless, like a statue, and in all those hours she asked herself but one question—"Do I love this man? and, if so, how can I ever bear to marry the other?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

AFTERNOON TEA.

"I wish you'd come, Daisy. You've no idea what it is, facing all those swells by oneself!"

likely a bishop to marry you. Hang it, Daisy, I've got an uncle smothered in lawn; I'll give him the straight tip, and ask him to tip you up fast."

"You'll have to leave the Park at once," was Daisy's reply, "or you'll be returned absent when the parade is formed. You know, Bill you daren't be late, for your life."

The two young men were by this time at Albert Gate, having spent a pleasant half-hour together on a couple of penny chairs, while the strange medley passed before them that throngs Hyde Park on every summer's afternoon. Daisy was far happier than he either hoped or deserved. After Satanella's refusal, he had felt at liberty to follow the dictates of his own heart, and lost no time in prosecuting his suit with Norah Macormac. The objections that might have arisen from want of means were anticipated by his uncle's unlooked for liberality, and he was to be married as soon as the necessary arrangements could be made, though, in consideration of his late doings, the engagement was at present to be kept a profound secret.

Notwithstanding some worldly wisdom, Daisy could believe that such secrets divided amongst half-a-dozen people, would not become the property of half-a-hundred.

In mood like his, a man requires no companion but his own thoughts. We will rather accompany Soldier Bill, as he picks his way into Belgravia, stepping daintily over the muddy crossings, cursing the water-carts, and trying to preserve the polish of his boots, up to Mrs. Lushington's door.

Yet into those shining boots his heart seemed almost sinking, when he marked a long line of carriages in the streets, a crowd of lookmen on the steps and pavement. No man alive had better nerve than Bill, to ride, or fight, or swim, or face any physical danger; but his hands turned cold, and his face hot, when about to confront strange ladies, either singly or in masses; and for him, the rustling of muslin was as the shaking of a standard to the inexperienced charger, a signal of unknown danger, a flutter of terror and dismay.

Nevertheless, he mastered his weakness, following his own name resolutely up-stairs, in a white heat no doubt, yet supported by the calmness of despair. Fortunately, he found his hostess at her drawing-room door. The favorable greeting she accorded him would have re-assured the most diffident of men.

"You're a good boy," she whispered, with a squeeze of his hand. "I was almost afraid you wouldn't come. Stay near the door, while I do the civil to the arch-duchess. I'll be back directly. I've got something very particular to ask you."

So, while Mrs. Lushington did homage (in French) to the arch-duchess, who was old, fat, good-humored, and very sleepy, Bill took up a position from which he could pass the inmates of the apartment in review. Observing his welcome by their hostess, and knowing who he was, two or three magnificent ladies thought it not derogatory to afford him a gracious bow; and as they forbore to engage him in discourse, a visitation, of which Bill had fearful misgivings, he soon felt sufficiently at ease to inspect unconcernedly, and in detail, the several individuals who constituted the crush.

It was a regular London gathering, in the full-tide of the season, consisting of the best-dressed, best-looking, and idlest people in town. There seemed an excess of ladies, as usual; but who would complain of a summer market that it was overstocked with flowers? While of the uglier sex, the specimens were either very young or very mature. There was scarcely a man to be seen between thirty and forty, but a glut of young gentlemen, some too much and some too little at their ease, with a liberal sprinkling of ancient dandies, irreproachable in manners, and worthier members of society, we may be permitted to hope, than society believed. A few notabilities were thrown in, of course: the arch-

... The hour had not yet come—nor the woman!

Far different was St. Josephs. If ever man exulted in bondage and seemed proud to rattle his chains, that man was the captive General. He never missed an opportunity of attending his conqueror: riding in the Park—"walking the Zoo"—waiting about at balls, drums, crush-rooms, and play-houses,—he never left her side.

Miss Douglas, loathing her own ingratitude, was weary of her life. Even Bill could not help remarking the pale cheeks, the heavy eyes, the dull lassitude of gait and bearing, that denoted the feverish unrest of one who is sick at heart.

He trod on a chaperone's skirt, and omitted to beg pardon; he stumbled against his uncle, the bishop, and forgot to ask after his aunt. So taken up was he with the faded looks of Miss Douglas, that he neither remembered where he was, nor why he came, and only recovered consciousness with the rustle of Mrs. Lushington's dress and her pleasant voice in his ear.

"Give me your arm," said she, pushing on through her guests, with many winning smiles, "and take me into the little room for some tea."

Though a short distance, it was a long passage. She had something pleasant to say to everybody, as she threaded the crowd; but it could be no difficult task for so experienced a campaigner, on her own ground, to take up any position she required. And Bill found himself established at last by her side, in a corner, where they were neither overlooked nor overheard.

"Now I want to know if it's true?" said she, dashing into the subject at once. "You can tell, if anybody can, and I'm sure you have no secrets from me."

"If what's true?" asked Bill, gulping tea that made him duller than ever.

"Don't be stupid!" was her reply. "Why about Daisy of course. Is he going to marry that Irish girl? I want to find out at once."

"Well, it's no use denying it," stammered Bill, somewhat unwillingly. "But it's a dead secret, Mrs. Lushington, and of course it goes no farther."

"Oh, of course!" she repeated. "Don't you know how safe I am? But you're quite sure of it? You have it from himself?"

"I've got to be his best man," returned Bill, by no means triumphantly. "You'll coach me up a little, won't you, before the day? I haven't an idea what to do."

She laughed merrily. "Make love to the bridesmaids, of course," she answered. "Irish, no doubt, every one of them. I'm not quite sure I shall give you leave."

"I can't get out of it!" exclaimed Bill. "He's such a 'pal,' you know, and a brother-officer, and all."

She was amused at his simplicity. "I don't want you to get out of it," she answered, still laughing. "I can't tell what sort of a best man you'll make, but you're not half a bad boy. You deserve something for coming to-day. Dine with us to-morrow—nobody but the Gordon girls and a stray man. I must go and see the lady off. That's the worst of royalty. Good-bye," and she sailed away, leaving Bill somewhat disconcerted by misgivings that he had been guilty of a breach of trust.

The party was thinning visibly upstairs, while people transferred themselves with one accord to the hall and staircase, many appearing to consider this the pleasantest part of the entertainment. Mrs. Lushington had scarcely yet found time to speak three words to Blanche Douglas, but she caught her dear friend now, on the eve of departure, and held her fast.

TO BE CONTINUED.

Curtis F. Mixer, of Hastings, Mich., and E. K. Holcomb, of Cedar Springs, Mich., are matched to wrestle collar and elbow.