

HOW IT ALL CAME ROUND.

(L. T. Meade, in "Sunday Magazine.")

CHAPTER XXXIII.—THE READING OF THE WILL.

Charlotte's depression did not remain with her all through the day. She was a healthy creature, healthy both in body and mind. It was impossible for her, with the bright spring sun shining, and with her wedding-day but one week absent, not to turn again to hope. She saw that she had vexed Hinton. She still felt that queer and uncomfortable desire to be at Somerset House, just at the very hour when her lover had pleaded for her society. But she reflected that when she told him the story, when she proudly cleared her father in his eyes, he would most abundantly forgive her.

"He hates secrets," she said to herself; "and it is the last, the very last, little, tiny secret I shall ever have from my darling."

By the way it will be seen that she had ceased to fear her grandfather's will. She had ordered the carriage immediately after lunch, and now asked the coachman to drive to the Strand. As she lay back at her ease she reflected how soon now her anxieties would be over.

"Dear father," she whispered to her heart, "how extra loving and tender I must be to him to-night! I believe him now—fully and absolutely believe him now. I am only doing this for John's sake."

When she reached the Strand she desired the coachman to stop. She would not have him drive to Somerset House. Her secret was a secret; even the old coachman, who had known her from her birth, must not guess it. She told him that she had some business to transact, but that he might meet her at a certain part of the Embankment in an hour.

The carriage rolled out of sight. Now she was alone. She was not accustomed to walking the London streets by herself. Certainly she had never been in the Strand before alone. She had dressed herself with studied plainness, and now, with her veil drawn tightly over her face, she hurried on. She had consulted the map, and knew exactly where Somerset House was. She also had obtained a little, a very little information as to how she was to act for the pursuit of her purpose, from a young barrister who had visited at her home with Hinton some few weeks before. She considered that she had gained her knowledge with considerable skill; and now with a beating heart, she proceeded to act on it. She turned into the great square which Somerset House encloses, found the particular building where wills are kept, and entered. She was now in a large room, or entrance-hall. There were many desks about, and some clerks, who did not seem particularly busy. Charlotte went up to one of the desks, a clerk lent an attentive ear, she told her errand.

"Ah! you want to read a will," said the gentleman. "You must first produce the proper stamp. Yes, yes, you can certainly see any will you desire. Just go through that door to your right, walk down the passage, you will see a door with such a direction written on it; ask for a search stamp. It will cost you a shilling. Bring it back to me."

Charlotte did as she was desired. The clerk she had appealed to, attracted by her appearance and manner, was willing to be both helpful and polite.

"Whose will do you want, madam?"

"I want my grandfather's will. His name was Harman."

"What year did he die?"

"Twenty-three years ago."

"Ah! just so. This is 1880. So he died in the year 1857. Do you see those catalogues to your left? Go up to those marked 1857. Look under letter H, until you find Harman. Bring the book open at that name to me."

Charlotte was clever at carrying out her instructions. She quickly returned with the book opened at the desired name. The clerk wrote Mr. Harman's name and a number of a folio on a small piece of blue paper. This he gave to Charlotte.

"Take this piece of paper to room number 31, along the passage," he said. "You will have the will very soon now."

She bowed, thanked him, and went away. At room 31 she was desired to wait in the reading-room. She found it without difficulty. It was a small room, with a long

table in the middle, and benches round it. At one end sat a clerk at a desk. Charlotte seated herself at the table. There were other people about, some reading wills, others waiting like herself. She happened just then to be the only woman in the room.

She drew up her veil, pressed her hand to her pale face and waited with what patience she could. She was too much excited to notice how she was looked at and her appearance commented upon. Sitting there and waiting with what courage she could muster, her tears returned. What stealthily thing was this she was doing in the dark! What march was she stealing on her father, her beloved and honored father! Suddenly it appeared to her that she had done wrong. That it would be better, more dignified, more noble to ask from his own lips the simple truth, than to learn it by such underhand means as these. She half rose to go away; but at this moment a clerk entered, gave a piece of folded paper to the man at the desk, who read aloud the one word—

"Harman."

Charlotte felt herself turning deadly white as she stood up to receive it. But when she really held her grandfather's will in her hand all desire not to read it had left her. She opened the folio with her shaking fingers, and began to read as steadily as she could.

Her eyes had scarcely, however, turned over the page, and most certainly her mind had failed to grasp the meaning of a single word, before, for some unaccountable reason, she raised her head. A large man had come in and had seated himself opposite to her. He was a man on an immense scale, with a rough, red, kind face, and the longest, most brilliantly colored beard Charlotte had ever seen. His round, bright blue eyes were fixed earnestly on the young lady. She returned his glance, in her own peculiar full and open way, then returned to her interrupted task. Ah! what a task it was after all. How hard to understand, how difficult to follow! Charlotte, unused to all law phraseology, failed to grasp the meaning of what she read. She knit her pretty brows, and went over each passage many times. She was looking for certain names, and she saw no mention of them. Her heart began to leap with renewed joy and hope. Ah! surely, surely her grandfather had been unjust, and her own beloved father was innocent. Mrs. Home's story was but a myth. She had read for such a long, long time, and there was no mention of her or of her mother. Surely if her grandfather meant to leave them money he would have spoken of it before now. She had just turned another page, and was reading on with a light heart, when the clerk again entered. Again Charlotte raised her head, she could not tell why. The clerk said something to the clerk at the desk, who, turning to the tall foreign-looking man said—

"The will of the name of Harman is being read just now by some one in the room."

"I will wait then," answered the man in his deep voice.

Charlotte felt herself turning first crimson, then pale. She saw that the man observed her. A sudden sense of fright and of almost terror oppressed her. Her sweet and gracious calm completely deserted her. Her fingers trembled so that she could scarcely turn the page. She did not know what she feared. A nightmare seemed pressing on her. She felt that she could never grasp the meaning of the will. Her eyes travelled farther down the page. Suddenly her finger stopped; her brain grew clear, her heart beat steadily. This was what she read—

"I will and bequeath all the residue of my real and personal estate and effects to the said John Harman, Jasper Harman, and Alexander Wilson, in trust to sell and realise the same, and out of the proceeds thereof to invest such a sum in public stocks or funds, or other authorized securities, as will produce an annual income of £1,200 a year, and to hold the investment of the said sum in trust to pay the income thereof to my dear wife for her life; and after her decease to hold the said investment in trust for my daughter Charlotte to her sole and separate use, independently of any husband with whom she may intermarry."

Charlotte Harman was not the kind of woman who faints. But there is a heart faintness when the muscles remain unmoved, and the eyes are still bright. At that moment her youth died absolutely. But though she felt its death pang, not a movement of her proud face betrayed her. She saw, without looking at him, that the red faced man was

watching her. She forced herself to raise her eyes, and saying simply, "This is Mr. Harman's will," handed it to him across the table. He took it, and began to devour the contents with quick and practised eyes. What she had taken so long to discover he took in at a glance. She heard him utter a smothered exclamation of pain and horror. She felt not the least amazement or curiosity. All emotion seemed dead in her. She drew on her gloves deliberately, pulled down her veil, and left the room. That dead, dead youth she was dragging away with her had made her feel so cold and numb that she never noticed that the red-faced man had hastily folded up the will, had returned it to the clerk at the desk, and was following her. She went through the entrance-hall, glancing neither to the left or right. The man came near. When they both got into the square he came to her side, raised his hat and spoke

CHAPTER XXXIV.—TRUSTEES.

"Madam," said the stranger, "you will pardon my intruding on you, but I saw it in your face. You are interested in that will you have just read."

"Yes," answered Charlotte simply. "At another time she would have given an indignant retort to what she would have considered a liberty. Now she turned her eyes with a mute appeal in them to this stranger, for she recognized kindness in his tones.

"It was my grandfather's will," she said, responding yet farther to the full, kind gaze he gave her back.

"Ah! then that sets me right," said Sandy Wilson for it was he. "That sets me right, young lady. Now I saw you got a considerable bit of a shock just then. You ain't, you'll forgive me saying so, but you ain't quite fit to meet any of your people for a bit; you may want them not to guess, but any one with half an eye can see you're not the young lady you were even when I entered that reading room not half an hour back. I'm a rough, plain man, but I'm very much interested in that will too, and I'd like to have a little bit of a talk with you about it, if you'll allow me. Suppose, miss, that you and I just take a turn round the square for a few moments."

Charlotte's answer to this was to turn her face again towards the particular building where she had read the will, and her companion, turning with her began to talk eagerly.

"You see, miss, it was quite a little bit of luck brought you and me together to-day. The gentleman who made that will was your grandfather; your name is—"

"Harman," answered Charlotte.

"Ah! yes, I see; and I—I am Alexander Wilson. I don't suppose you ever saw me before—but I, too, am much interested in that will. I have been abroad, and—supposed to be dead almost ever since that will was made. But I was not dead; I was in Australia; I came home a week ago, and found out my one living relation, my niece, my sister's child. She is married and is a Mrs. Home now, but she is the Charlotte named in Mr. Harman's will, the Charlotte to whom, and to her mother before her, Mr. Harman left £1,200 a year."

"Yes," said Charlotte Harman. She found difficulty in dragging this one word from her lips.

"Madam, I find my niece very poor; very, very poor. I go and look at her father's will, I see there that she is entitled to wealth, to what she would consider riches. I find also that this money is left for her benefit in the hands of trustees; two of the trustees are called Harman, the other, madam, is—I myself; I—Alexander Wilson, am the other trustee, supposed to be dead. I could not hitherto act, but I can act now. I can get that wronged woman back her own. Yes, a monstrous piece of injustice has been done. It was full time for Sandy Wilson to come home. Now the first thing I must do is to find the other trustees; I must find the Harman's where-where they are, for these Harman's have robbed my niece."

"I can give you their addresses," answered Charlotte, suddenly pausing in her walk and turning and facing her companion.

"John Harman, the other trustee, who, as you say, has robbed Mrs. Home, is my father. I am his only child. His address is Prince's Gate, Kensington."

"Good heavens!" said Wilson, shocked and frightened by her manner; "I never guessed that you were his child—and yet you betray him."

"I am his only child. When do you wish to see him?"

To this question Wilson made no answer for a few moments. Though a just man, he was a kind one. He could read human nature with tolerable accuracy. It was despair, not want of feeling, which put those hard tones into that young voice. He would not, he could not, take advantage of its bewilderment.

"Miss Harman," he said after a pause, "you will pardon me, but I don't think you quite know what you are saying; you have got a considerable bit of a shock; you were not prepared for this baseness—this baseness on your father's part."

Here her eyes, turned with a sudden swift flash of agony upon him, said as plainly as eyes could speak—

"Need you ask?"

"No, you could not have guessed it," continued Sandy, replying to this mute, though beautiful appeal, almost with tears. "You are Mr. Harman's only child. Now I dare say you are a good bit of an idol with him. I know how I'd worship a fine lassie like you if I had her. Well, well, miss; I don't want to pain you, but when young things come all o' a heap on a great wrong like you have done to-day, they're apt, whatever their former love, to be a bit, just a bit, too hard. They do things in their first agony, that they are sorry enough for by-and-by. Now, miss, what I want to say is this, that I won't take down your father's address to-day, nor listen indeed to anything you may tell me about him. I want you to sleep it over, miss. Of course something must be done, but if you will sleep it over, and I, Sandy Wilson, sleep it over too, we'll come together over the business with our heads a deal clearer than we could when we both felt scared, so to speak, as we doubtless do just at present. I won't move hand or foot in the matter until I see you again, Miss Harman. When do you think you will be able to see me again?"

"Will this hour to-morrow do?"

"Yes; I shall be quite at your service. And as we may want to look at that will again, suppose we meet just here, miss?"

"I will be here at this hour to-morrow," said Charlotte, and as she spoke she pulled out her watch to mark the exact time. "It is a quarter-past four now," she said; "I will meet you here at this hour to-morrow, at a quarter-past four."

"Very well, young lady, and may God help you! If I might express a wish for you, it is that you may have a good hard cry between now and then. When I was told, and quite sudden-like too, that my little sister, Daisy Wilson, was dead, nothing took off the pressure from my heart and brain like a good hearty cry. So I wish you the same. They say women need it more than men."

Charlotte watched Wilson out of the square then she slowly followed him. The numbness of that dead youth was still oppressing her heart and brain. But she remembered that the carriage must be waiting for her on the Embankment, also that her father—she gasped a little as the thought of her father came to her—that her father would have returned from the City; that he might ask for her, and would wonder and grow uneasy at her absence. She must go home, that was her first thought. She hurried her steps, anxious to take the first turning which would lead to the Embankment.

She had turned down a side street and was walking rapidly, when she heard her name called suddenly and eagerly, and a woman, very shabbily dressed, came up to her.

"Oh, Miss Harman—Miss Harman—don't you know me?"

Charlotte put her hand to her brow.

"Yes," she said, "I know you now; you are Hester Wright. Is your husband out of prison yet?"

"He is, miss, and he's dying; he's dying 'ard, 'ard; he's allers saying as he wants to see either you or his master. We are told that the master is ill; but oh! miss, miss, of you would come and see him, he's dreadful anxious—dreadful, dreadful anxious. I think it's just some't' on his mind; if he could tell it, I believe as he'd die easy. Oh! my beautiful, dear young lady, every one has a good word for you. Oh! I was going to make bold to come to Prince's Gate and ask you to come to see him. You'll never be sorry, miss, if you can help a poor soul to die easy."

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