

"But will you not dislike it, Avy? It is like putting you on the shelf at once, and I know it will bring back so much to you—"

"That need not trouble you now," said Avico in her quiet voice; "it is so long ago. I am very glad to do it, Frances, and it will please the children; let me tell them."

Ella and Hugh were delighted, and warmly thanked aunt Avico for her unexpected kindness; they walked about her and sang impromptu in her honor.

"Oh, uncle George!" exclaimed Ella to Mr. Wayland, "here's a bit of fun! we are going to the Downhurst ball after all; aunt Avico is to take care of me, and Hugh is to take care of you, and it will be famous!"

"Will it, indeed? and pray who takes care of aunt Avico, Miss Ella? Play one of the old waltzes, please, Frances," and Mr. Wayland spun his sister round the room, and then gave Ella a turn, declaring, with what breath he had left, that the elder lady was incomparably the better partner. "She is lighter, quicker, and more finished in her style; you are never likely to equal her, young woman, with your bend and your sweep, and your twisted, overweighted head; though if you took care of your feet and forgot the rest of you, you might have a chance."

"What about your dress, aunt Avico?" asked Ella. "Do not go in one of those eternal black silks!"

"I am going to have a new one; you shall see."

"Make yourself pretty, auntie," said Hugh; "I am very particular."

When the ball-night came, Hugh's particularity was chiefly expended on his own person and the little frills aforesaid. Ella was ready first, and duly exhibited her white tulle and rosebuds, with her fresh blooming face, to the household. The maids and the children were delighted, the boys scornful, while Fanny, the next in age to Ella, was very appreciative and rather wistful. Uncle George came next, bald, round, and comfortable, with the largest camellia in the greenhouse in his buttonhole; just like a market gardener, his son said, when he too appeared, an exquisite design in black and white, but with a pucker of care on his smooth young face, occasioned by a difficulty he had met with in the arrangement of his own miniature bouquet. Then there was a cry for aunt Avico. She had been a little shy about the family criticisms, and would show her dress to no one beforehand; she was sorry for this when the chorus began—

"Oh, aunt Avy!"

"Upon my word, Avico!"

"It is lucky I could not go, Avico, or we should have missed this."

"In this style, two-and-ten: a most elegant article, madam!" said Hugh, with a shopman's flourish over his aunt.

"I did not expect to be quite so fine; I am afraid it is too like a fancy ball," said Miss Wayland timidly, with an unwanted color on her clear brown cheek.

"Every one 'costumes' now; it is perfect," said Ella encouragingly.

The dress began with a skirt of pale buff silk; the upper skirt was sprinkled with carnations on the same creamy ground; the bodice was edged with carnation ribbon; there was the usual knot of the same in her light wavy hair, but a small diamond spray replaced the white lace, and there was another sparkle on the red ribbon round her throat.

"It is the very model of a young chaperon," said Mrs. Marlowe; "I hope both you and Ella will make a successful debut."

The ball was an annual one, for the benefit of the Downhurst Dispensary; it had great ladies as patronesses and harpists for stewards, and all the neighborhood went, as to a great social ceremony, independent of any interest in the dancing. Mr. Wayland insisted on going through the first quadrille with his sister, then found her a seat on the chaperon's benches, near some of her friends, and went off to his whist. Ella's card was soon well filled, and Hugh had several anxious consultations with his cousin as to the most judicious arrangement of his. Miss Wayland kept her card to serve as a programme of the music; the waltzes thrilled her a little, but when one or two of her old partners found her out, she would not dance but sat chatting with her friends, watching the changing rattling crowd, or thinking a little of old times, when her father and mother watched her, and George and Frances. It did not seem so very long ago; but now it was for George's boy and Frances' girl, and it was she who looked on.

Presently Ella missed a dance and came to sit by her aunt.

"It is delicious, aunt Avy, I do so like it! it would have been dreadful to have missed it! I wish you were dancing too."

"That is the sort of person I should have to dance with!" said Miss Wayland, indicating a stout, red-faced man, standing in a sort of stammer near the door of the cardroom. "Who is your next partner?"

"Hugh, and then a stranger. Mrs. Parvin introduced him, but I could not hear his name; he is quite mediocrity, but looks nice."

"Come along, Ella," said Hugh, with courtly absence of ceremony, and the pair went off, looking in their single-minded enjoyment, as pleasant a couple as any in the room; but this was aunt Avico's partial opinion. After the dance, Hugh came back alone, saying "Come and get an ice, aunt Avico; Ella is with her partner, a highly respectable elderly party, who will take fatherly care of her if we do not get back in time."

They had to wait a little, and the vestibule became crowded as the dancers poured in. Miss

Wayland was standing near a table, wedged in, when a hand was stretched over her shoulder to take an ice-plate from a waiter. It belonged to a tall man behind her whom she could not see; it was withdrawn in a moment, but she knew it well, though she had not seen it for thirteen years. She would have known it without the peculiar signet ring, but with it there could be no doubt. It was a large hand, brown, and wide across the back, but with well-shaped fingers and a long thumb; a hand well used out of doors, yet not unfamiliar with tool and pen; a hand that thirteen years ago had clasped hers for a bitter farewell. "I must go," its owner had said, "there is no help for it, little Avico; I must go, and I cannot say one hopeful word of meeting again, but surely we need not quite forget each other." And she had seen it again, Robert Ayrton's hand, and she dared not turn to see his face, for he must have forgotten, and she had begun to think she was forgetting too.

"Are you ready, aunt Avico? Miss Ferguson won't wait for any one, and I had no end of bother to work an introduction to her."

So Hugh took his aunt back to her place, and went off to find the favorite of the evening, while Miss Wayland waited — not long, for Ella's partner came to deposit her with her chaperon. He was the medieval party she had so flippantly alluded to; he was, perhaps, forty-three or four — a tall man with a complexion that told of India, dark hair beginning to turn grey and retract from the temples, and a large dark beard. A very fine-looking man, though a little too old to be interesting to a girl like Ella, for he was certainly middle-aged; he was altered in almost every line and feature, but he was Robert Ayrton, and Avico Wayland knew him instantly. She had had full five minutes for preparation, so the stately little lady who stepped forward to give him her hand was far more collected than he was; he stammered, he fairly blushed through his Indian brown, and could not conceal his astonishment.

"He is certainly married," she thought; "he is wondering how to tell me. He need not be afraid, and make such a spectacle of himself!"

"How cool she is!" he thought, resentfully. "Of course she means to forget all that folly; most likely she has forgotten it; perhaps she is married: I think she must be!"

If she were married, he was, of course, an injured man, in that she had been able to console herself; so Major Ayrton, thinking he would make the most of it and plant a little thorn or two of reproach in her faithless bosom, took a melancholy tone as he answered her.

"I have only been a fortnight in England; thirteen years is not a life-time, but it seems long enough for most of a man's friends to forget him."

"Surely not!"

"Yes, I came with the Carmichaels, and I had lots of people I used to know, looking very much the same, yet no one knew me but one man, who knew I was expected. I am very grateful to you for recognizing me, but perhaps you too knew I was coming?"

"Oh, no! I did not; but I knew you though you are altered, as we all must be, in so many years."

"You are not altered, not much at least; it is times that are changed; why, I do not even know what to call you."

"Nor I you," she said, parrying the awkward question.

"One or two very old and faithful friends remember that my name is Robert, but most people prefer to keep me at a distance, and say 'Major Ayrton.'"

"He is very cross," thought poor aunt Avico; "what shall I do with him? If he would mention his wife at once, we might have a comfortable chat."

She must be married! I had better drop the sentimental," he thought.

"Oh, Miss Wayland! will you take care of my poor broken fan?" said a young lady who was going to dance. He caught the name, once so familiar, and mollified directly, taking a seat and assuming a more reasonable tone.

"I shall know all about it in time, but it is trying to have all the changes of thirteen years come upon one in a heap. How is it that I find you here? do you not live at Beaconhill now?"

"No; I stay there very often, but my home is at Mountfield, with my sister—you know—"

"Yes, yes, I know; I have gathered a good deal of your family history from the papers, and chance friends. I knew that Mrs. Marlowe had lost her husband. I suppose it was her daughter I danced with just now? I remember the little creature you used always be petting. Is your sister here to-night?"

"No, but George and his son are, and I am chaperoning Ella."

"You!"

"Yes; why not? Times change with us all, you see."

"But you are not—not qualified! Surely that young lady called you Miss Wayland?" he said, looking very blank.

"So I am," she answered demurely, enjoying his surprise.

"And you think yourself old enough to be a duenna, and sit up here while I dance with your niece! Is that it? I never heard anything so ridiculous! I cannot stand it, however; come and dance this waltz with me."

She protested, but he would not listen.

"You must indeed. Why, I see you like carnations still, and you are as like one as ever. It is quite absurd to pretend you cannot dance; come, Avico!"

This was hardly the tone of a married man, but if he had had three wives looking on in a row, she thought she would dance that dance; and so she did, in spite of Hugh's open-mouthed astonishment; and they found that wherever the weight of the thirteen years might lie, it was not dragging at their feet. He hovered about all the rest of the evening, and they had two more dances and a world of talk, of old times and now, and the long space that lay between. He was introduced to Mr. Wayland, who had not previously known him, and the idea of the wife waxed fainter in Avico Wayland's mind. What she was thinking of, she did not exactly know, except that Robert Ayrton was there beside her again, and, but for the board and Ella's wondering face, the thirteen years might have been a dream.

"Good-bye," she said at the ball-room door, trying not to show how sorry she was that it was over.

"Good night," he answered, smiling down upon her, and not looking sorry in the least.

"What is it, aunt Avy? What have you been doing?" whispered Ella.

"Hush! don't say anything," said her aunt, giving her a sort of a hug, as she wrapped her cloak round her.

"I am so glad you danced, aunt Avico, instead of sitting stunk up like a beetle on a wall, all night," said Hugh benevolently, as they drove home.

"Ayrton, Ayrton," said Mr. Wayland musingly; "why, was not that the man—"

"Yes that was the man," answered his sister quite sharply.

He said no more, but she heard him whistle once or twice to himself, before he went to sleep in his corner.

"Well, did aunt Avico make a good chaperon?" asked Mrs. Marlowe, next day, at the breakfast that had managed to run into luncheon.

"Oh, famous! never bothered a bit, and stayed ever so late," said Hugh; but Ella blushed scarlet, and aunt Avico looked terribly uncomfortable.

Mrs. Marlowe feared that Ella had been in some way transgressing; but Mr. Wayland said, with twinkling eyes—

"You should have lent her your black velvet gown, Frances; that carnation affair was far too killing for a chaperon."

Mrs. Marlowe was a woman of tact and prudence, so she dropped the subject till she had her sister to herself.

"What has been the matter, Avico? I hope Ella is not getting fast?"

"Oh no! It is not Ella, it is all my fault; I am very sorry, but I have been so foolish!" and Miss Wayland told her sister all the story, much as if it were a guilty confession.

"And what do you mean to do?"

"There is nothing to do; I am not likely to see him again; and, Frances, you must stop George's teasing, for I am sure Ella guesses. Oh dear! I will never go to a ball again, there is actually a hole in my shoe, and I feel quite disgraced."

"Nonsense! How could you know you would meet the man that night, of all nights? It was very foolish of me to allow you to call yourself a chaperon. I wish I had gone, and taken you."

The next day brought Major Ayrton for a call, twenty miles at least; and Mrs. Marlowe was not surprised when the day after that brought him for a proposal. Miss Wayland's old maid, who had been with her more than those thirteen years, remarked that a burnt stick was soon lighted; and so it was. Robert Ayrton's old love had quite won him back. He did not say much about constancy, for he was wonderfully touched to find that little Avico had never been able to persuade herself to care for any one else, and one or two efforts for matrimony he had made in the meantime seemed to spoil the romance of the thing, and he was very glad now that they had failed. Still she took a good deal of persuading, was full of doubts and fears, and held out for two hours, in the morning-room, making excuses, more to herself than to him; but, of course, she had to give in; and Major Ayrton's last word to her that day were, "We will have a house at Dover; there are plenty of balls there, and you shall chaperon your niece to as many as you please."

DESMORO;

OR, THE RED HAND.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "TWENTY STRAWS," "VOICES FROM THE LUMBER-ROOM," "THE HUNTING-BIRD," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"DEAR DESMORO,—

"I am so glad to be permitted to write to you to tell you that you are now the father of a very fine boy whom I, his fond mother, think absolute perfection. But, strange to relate, the little fellow has been born with a red hand—one of his palms (the left one), and all the fingers belonging to that hand, being crimson as a poppy. At first I was quite alarmed when nurse showed me the extraordinary mark; but I am

now growing used to the sight of it, and by-and-by perhaps, I shall not even notice it.

"He is very like you, my dear husband. Ah! you may laugh at me, but he is! He has your violet-colored eyes, your forehead and chin; but his nose — well, as yet I can hardly say what that feature will be like. I am very proud of him, you may feel sure. All the mother is aroused in my heart, and I feel ready to risk my very life for my child—for that child which only a short fortnight ago I had not seen.

"But my own Desmoro must not be jealous of my new-born love. I do not prize my husband a whit the less because his son is nestling at my breast.

"I am beginning to grow impatient for your return home. Has it been decided whether your regiment will be ordered? I do hope not to the West Indies, because of the unhealthiness of that climate. But whithersoever thou goest, my beloved, I will be by thy side."

"Feeling very giddy, I broke off a little while ago, and took a couple of hours' rest. Now baby is not very well, and nurse is advising me to have him baptised at once. Of course, I shall call him after his own papa, whose name is so musical to my ear that my tongue is ever hungering to pronounce it.

"You will soon return to me now, dearest, will you not? I fancy that the people here where I am lodging begin to look upon me with suspicion. The secrecy which you have obliged me to observe regarding your position has, I suppose, created in their minds distrust, which I perceive, now and then, peeping out in sundry ways.

"I trust you have broken the news of our marriage to your elder brother, as I am very anxious to communicate to my parents the name and the true position of my good husband. It is painful for me to remember that they refuse to credit the fact of our being man and wife unless I show them my wedding certificate, or disclose to them the name of the church in which the holy ceremony was performed, which you know I cannot do, having promised you most faithfully never to divulge to any one aught concerning our affairs, until you shall give me full permission to do so.

"But my Desmoro will recollect that he is a parent, and that it is now his duty to remove from his wife and child every shade of obscurity that may be likely to draw upon them either mistrust or impertinent observation.

"Although I have written you a very long letter, I could still find a great deal more to say to you, did I feel equal to the task of committing my words to paper. But my head is feeling very weak, and my hand is exceedingly tremulous as well, so I must conclude at once.

"With best love, believe me to be,

"Ever your affectionate wife,

"ANNA DESMORO."

The reader of this epistle, who was a remarkably handsome man of about six-and-twenty years of age, crushed the sheet of paper in his hand, and closing his fingers tightly on it, uttered aloud an impatient exclamation, which exclamation caused a gentleman present to suddenly look up from his breakfast-plate, and glance at the face opposite to him.

"What's the matter, Des?" he demanded in a tone that was spiced with a little authority, at the same time fixing a pair of keen eyes upon the person thus addressed. "What's that letter about, eh? Got into some confounded scrape or other, I'll be bound; or is it one of the rascally tradesmen's bills that's annoying you so?"

"Tradesmen's bill, indeed! As if such a thing as that could give me a moment's trouble of any kind?"

"Well, then, what is it that's making you look as if you had just seen a ghost?"

Desmoro made no answer, but struck his clenched hand upon the table before him.

"Ah, I see! Another silly affair of the heart, Des! How the deuce do you contrive to remain such a fool?"

"Oh, as to that," replied the other, in piqued accents, "everybody hasn't your philosophy and adamant breast; it is the weakness of some people to feel a little."

"Call it their misfortune rather than their weakness, Des," returned his companion, with considerable sarcasm. "But that is neither here nor there; it seems pretty plain that you've been suffering yourself to get entangled in some way; and, such being the case, I, as your elder brother, claim the privilege of addressing you on the subject. Whence came that missive which is now undergoing such a passage at your hands?"

"Percy, don't ask me!" stammered the other, his face now flushing deeply. "Elder brother of mine though you be, I cannot perceive what right you have to catechize me respecting any of my private affairs."

"Desmoro Symuro, I am ten years your senior, and your guardian by the will of our late father, which facts furnish me with every right to prevent—if I can—your going astray. The truth is, Des, I've long been suspecting that something was wrong with you, and I have been waiting for a fitting opportunity of questioning you relative to—"

"I'll not so earthly use your questioning me, Percy!" interrupted the young man, with an impetuous burst. "I can't marry Miss Calthorpe, let that information satisfy you."

"You cannot marry Miss Calthorpe—a lady to whom you have actually engaged yourself? Why, Desmoro, you are taking leave of your senses, I verily do believe!"

"I should just like to know whether Percy Symuro himself has always done the right thing