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The Die is Cast For Better or For Worse.

CHAPTER XII
The Wolf at the Door.

Percy Vilorne, the most unpractical of the band, hinted that Kittie might be led to believe her father had left a considerable sum behind him; but the idea was scouted with scorn. "Fancy trying to take our Kittie in with such a feeble plan as that!" said Bickers, with something like indignation. "She'd spot it in a moment, and then where should we be?"

"Why not let her go down to your mother's cottage by the wood," said Teddy Wilson.

Bickers shook his head. "I've tried that; of course I've tried it. D'you think I haven't any brains? Thought of it the first thing. My mother would be delighted; she wrote to Kittie; and I tried all I knew to persuade her, but she won't go. Looks too much like—like charity; and, of course, Miss Kittie shies at that."

"If we could only get her something to do," said Mandeville, gazing round thoughtfully at the shabby walls of the cheap Soho restaurant where they were holding the conference.

Teddy Wilson shook his head. "Yes; but what can she do? She can't teach—"

"I should like to see Miss Kittie wearing herself out over a lot of sniveling brats!" remarked Vilorne, with a snort.

"There's typewriting—but that's worse, if anything," said Bickers.

"Not to be thought of," declared Mandeville. "I know a girl who does that, and she says that she's always got a headache, and that she hears the click of the keys all the while she's asleep. Miss Kittie's awfully clever with her needle; makes her own dresses."

"That's very different to making other people's," said Bickers. "Of course there are ever so many things she could do, but there is no money in them, worse luck."

It was significant that no one of them suggested, or even thought of, the stage; they would have considered the idea a profanation.

"Aren't there any relations, old friends?" asked Mandeville.

"Not that I know of," said Wilson; "not that any of us know of. And if there were, Miss Kittie would be too proud to hang on to them. I know that game; dependent in the house of an uncle, or cousin, with all the family looking down on her; or living

with a maiden aunt, who'd treat her like an upper servant, except that she wouldn't pay her any wages. Miss Kittie would stand that for a long while, wouldn't she?"

"Something must be done," said Teddy Wilson moodily. "There can't be much money left; though we've tried to work it in the matter of expenses."

They had succeeded in deceiving poor Kittie over the undertaker's bill, and some of the outstanding accounts. Bloggs, for one, had been squared, to the extent of at least two-thirds of his bill.

"Pears to me we'd better hear Miss Kittie's views—if she has any yet, poor child! I vote that Bickers go round to her this evening, and see if she is able to talk about matters. It would all be easy enough, if she would only let us look after her."

"Which she won't," said Teddy Wilson; and the rest shook their heads in regretful assent.

Bickers went round to Denbeigh Street soon afterward, and found Kittie at work at the plain and cheap black dress. She gave him her thin hand, and smiled wanly at him; she did not weep, though the sight of him recalled the dead father; for her tears were exhausted for the time. With a poor assumption of cheerfulness, even of nonchalance, Bickers approached the all-important subject, and he was both grieved and relieved to find that she was equal to discussing it.

"Of course there's no hurry," he said, with an air. "You know, we've got plenty of money in hand, Miss Kittie."

She looked at him with a little smile, which made Bickers grow red and fidget.

"I know exactly, or pretty nearly, how much," she said. "I think I know, can guess, how much you have already done for me." Her voice quavered, but she mastered it. "Of course I have got to get my own living."

"There's plenty of time. If you'd only go down to mother's for a while, Miss Kittie!" urged Bickers.

She seemed to wince, and she shook her head. "I shall find something to do," she said. "I was thinking of it just before you came in; I haven't been able to do so before. There must be something." She laughed a mirthless little laugh. "All the girls in the novels who are left badly off find something to do; at any rate, I'm like them in one respect; I refuse to live on charity, even on yours and the rest of the boys', though—I love you all for wanting me to."

"Of course, that's nonsense," said Bickers huskily; he did not mean the fact of her loving them. "Your father's often stood by us, all of us, when we've been stony broke; and he'd expect—"

Kittie shook her head. "I must think it over," she said. "I must consult Hagnes Hevangeline."

At that moment the door opened, and Agnes appeared.

"Mr. Levison, miss," she said.

Kittie braced herself, and nodded, and Mr. Levison came in. As he entered, Bickers rose to go; but Kittie, with a slight motion of her hand, signed to him to remain. Mr. Levison's face looked more impassive and expressionless than usual; and after he had greeted Kittie in his low, measured voice, he sat looking at his boots for a minute or two; then, raising his eyes slowly, he said:

"I suppose Mr. Bickers is here on the same errand as mine, Miss Kittie?"

"Yes," said Kittie. "We were talking about my future; sounds a very large word, doesn't it, for so insignificant a person? We can't decide whether I shall give an old lady from being run over, and inherit all her money, discover that I have a millionaire uncle who adopts me, or whether I'm to earn my living by nursing—I'm afraid all my patients would die—typewriting—I never could spell words of more than two syllables—going out as a companion to some snuffy old lady with whom I should quarrel on the first day. Have you any advice to give, Mr. Levison?"

"Yes," said Levison, in his slow way, "or I shouldn't have come. All the things you have been talking about are impossible—as you know. There is one thing you can do, and do well. And there's a fortune in it; all the other things means starvation."

Kittie looked up quickly, then down again at her needlework.

"Of course I mean the stage," he said. "I've seen Pockett; he is quite willing to engage you, on my word, my recommendation. He offered good terms, very liberal ones. I have a letter from him in my pocket; it only wants a sixpenny stamp to be an agreement." He took it from his pocketbook, and held it out to her. "Read it at any rate," he said, as she shook her head.

She read the letter, and her face flushed; but it quickly grew pale again, and her brows came together with a look of determination. Bickers, who had also grown red, drew a breath of relief.

"I couldn't do it," she said, returning the letter to Levison. "No, no; I could not! I—I am very grateful to you, but—it's impossible." Her eyes grew moist, but no tears fell. "I promised him that I would not, and I will keep my promise. It is a large sum, a very large sum, but—no, no; I cannot! I—I'd rather starve."

Mr. Levison's face expressed no disappointment or chagrin, as he returned the letter to its place.

"I am happy to think there is no question of starving, Miss Kittie," he said, almost cheerfully. "No doubt we shall find something in another direction. It's a pity, of course. As you say, it's a large sum. Pockett has been very liberal—the profession has its advantages; there are great prizes. And there can be no question of your success."

Kittie rose suddenly, her lips quivering, her hand pressed against her bosom.

"No, no!" she breathed.

"Better chuck it, Mr. Levison," warned Bickers, in a low voice.

"Certainly, certainly," said Levison. "I am very sorry to have distressed you, Miss Kittie. I had better go now. I hope you will forgive me. If you should change your mind—"

"I never shall, I never shall!" she said, as she gave him her hand. "I am very grateful to you—but no, no—I can't do it."

The two men went down the stairs in silence; it was not until they reached the street that Bickers said: "She'll keep her promise, Levison. And I'd be sorry if she didn't. Miss Kittie's too good for the stage."

Mr. Levison shrugged his shoulders slightly. "There are plenty of good women on the boards," he said. "It was a foolish promise. If Miss Kittie can find something else—But, can she? That's the question."

Kittie soon found that it was, indeed, a very grim question; she discovered that, though there is a great deal of work to be done in the vast

city of London, there are more than enough people to do it. She discussed the matter almost hourly with the faithful Hagnes Hevangeline; she answered advertisements with an expenditure of stationery and notepaper which brought no results; and to the advertisements which she herself inserted no replies came, excepting from registration-offices and employment agencies. The time passed with gruesome rapidity; she saw her little stock of money diminishing as rapidly. She would have to leave Denbeigh Street for a single room, an attic, in a still cheaper neighborhood; and she must make the move without letting the boys know; for she knew that they would oppose it strenuously, and insist upon giving her money.

She found a room, a miserable room at the top of a miserable house, in an equally miserable street in Westminster; and, choosing an afternoon on which Hagnes Hevangeline was "out," she moved thither, leaving a letter of good-by—a letter that was written, and also read, with tears—for the tender-hearted slaver.

Kittie had, of course, written also to the boys, through Bickers. In neither letter did she give her new address. What it cost Kittie to leave the shabby home in which she had been so happy, to write those two letters, no pen can describe. She felt as if she were parting from her old father, but every friend also, and was drifting out to an unknown sea.

And now began in more terrible earnest a fiercer struggle to keep the wolf from the door; and the effort so absorbed all her physical and mental powers that she had scarcely time or desire to think of anything else. At times the episode at Deerbroke came back to her, and she recalled the amazing scene in the moonlight when she had lain in Lashmore's arms, listened to his passionate avowal, and made the still more amazing compact with him. But the whole incident seemed so vague and nebulous as to be more of a dream than a reality; and but for the presence of the pink dress and the ring—which she had kept, though all her other trinkets had gone to the pawnbrokers—she could easily have been persuaded that she was the victim of a delusion.

Now and again she was fortunate enough to get work. She found a place in a collar factory; but the heat of the room, the noise of the machines, the long hours, soon told upon her; and the forewoman saw that she was not fitted for such work, and, kindly and regretfully enough, discharged her. For a week or two, after this Kittie was in sore straits; and it was inevitable that she should think of Mr. Levison's offer, of the large salary, and perhaps large fortune which awaited her if she should yield; but, great as the temptation was, she resisted it. She could starve, die perhaps, but she would not break her promise to her father, who had never shown his love more plainly than when he had exacted it from her.

One day she was on her way to pay a visit to a registry-office in Chelsea, on the chance of something turning up, and she passed the little news-vendor's shop to which she had told Lashmore that he might address any letters, if he wrote. She paused and looked before her hesitatingly. It was just possible he had written; but even if he had, what could it matter to her? It would be better to let the letter lie there; it would be better that she should forget him, that she should let him think that she—that is, Eva Lyndhurst—had broken the compact.

(To be Continued.)



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(To be Continued.)

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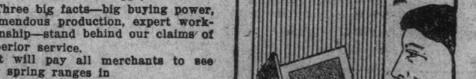
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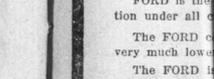
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