

MARJORIE DURANT.

CHAPTER I.

It was dreary in Daybridge town, where the pavements were covered with a greasy compound, sticky in some places, and slippery in others; and where the air was a mixture of smoke, chemical fumes, fog, and drizzle; but the streets were lively when compared with the high-road skirting the common. It was not far enough away to be beyond the black pall of smoke which overhung the town, and the keen north wind swept over the common, driving wayfarers along the unsheltered road as unceremoniously as it drove the fog and rain.

The path was made with furnace refuse, and the rain had turned this into wet, black grit, which crackled unpleasantly under the feet of a man who was walking towards the town. He seemed unconscious of the weather, and walked steadily on with his gaze fixed a long way ahead, rather as if he were looking into the future than at anything in the actual world around him. So deep was he in thought that he did not notice a private hansom, which came bowling along at a smart pace, until its occupant had hailed him several times.

"Hi, Bothwick! Bothwick, I say! Why on earth don't you pull up, Watson? Bothwick!"

The young man came out of his dream with a start as the cab stopped by the side of the path.

"Why, doctor, is that you?"

"Of course it is," said the new-comer testily. "What on earth are you doing here a day like this?"

"I've been for a walk," answered the young man.

"Oh! It's a nice afternoon for a walk. Something up, I suppose. You had better jump in, and tell me all about it over a bit of dinner."

The young man scrambled into the hansom, and as soon as it had started, the doctor became absorbed in a note-book which he held in his hand. Bothwick understood his friend's ways, and knew that he was expected to hold his tongue until the doctor was ready to give him his attention.

When the cab reached the town the driver turned down a long street of good sized houses, redolent of middle-class respectability, and stopped at a door to which was affixed a brass plate, bearing the inscription, "Dr. Gresham, Surgeon."

Bothwick was hurried into the house, relieved of his overcoat, and shown into a room where there was a good fire, while Dr. Gresham went to the surgery to give instructions to his assistant. By the time he returned dinner was ready, and the doctor would not hear a word of his friend's story until that was finished, but kept up a perpetual flow of small talk, which won the younger man from his gloomy thoughts in spite of himself.

At last the table was cleared, and the doctor, having filled Bothwick's glass, said:

"Now, go ahead, youngster."

"I've done it," answered the youngster tersely. "Left home for good and all."

"For good? That remains to be seen. How did it come about?"

"My father and I quarrelled this morning, and I thought it best to cut the whole thing there and then."

"What did you quarrel about?"

Bothwick hesitated for a moment, and then said with a tinge of embarrassment in his tone:

"About the usual thing, but if you don't mind I would rather not go into particulars."

Dr. Gresham nodded gravely as he answered:

"I understand. A case you did not approve of. Well, now, Hugh, I am going to give you some advice—you won't take it, of course, but it is my duty to give it to you nevertheless. Go back to your father and make it up with him. If you cut yourself adrift it will be forever, Mr. Bothwick will do nothing for you outside the business, I suppose?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"Then, my lad, go back. Smother your prejudices and make the best of it."

"No, sir; I will never go back. It is a dishonest business, and I will have nothing more to do with it."

"Stuff! You talk like that because your father deals with hundreds instead of thousands. One man is called a financier and the other a money-lender, but where is the difference except in the name?"

"If a thing is not honest it must be dishonest," said Hugh doggedly.

"I cannot live out of the necessities of my fellow-creatures."

"Necessities be hanged! What else do I live by, if you come to that? People don't pay me five shillings a visit just for the pleasure of my society; they send for me when they can't do without me, and people go to Mr. Bothwick when they can't do without him."

Hugh played impatiently with his wineglass. He knew Dr. Gresham was arguing quite against his own convictions.

"People come to you to be healed," he said; "in the other case——" an eloquent shrug finished his sentence.

Probably Dr. Gresham knew rather more of the estimation in which Mr. Bothwick was held than did his own son. It was undeniable that he belonged to the vampire tribe, and such names as "Old Sixty per Cent.," "Shylock," and others of an uncomplimentary nature were freely bandied about whenever Bothwick senior was mentioned. He had given his son a good education, sending him to a first-class school near London and afterwards to Germany. The lad spent all his holidays away, so that on coming home at the age of eighteen everything was strange to him.

His mother had died when he was a baby, broken-hearted at her husband's disgrace; for Mr. Bothwick was the son of a clergyman, and had gradually drifted from bad to worse; till at last after narrowly escaping imprisonment for a disreputable money transaction in connection with a bill, his family cast him off and disowned him altogether. He then left London, and after drifting for some time finally settled at Daybridge.

Of all this Hugh knew nothing. He had seen so little of his parents that the family history was a sealed book to him. Finding his home so uncongenial he was thrown entirely upon his own resources. He read much and thought much, girding at his life every day, and making several ineffectual struggles to escape. The sight of the people who came to his father's office was intolerable to him.

Who ever they were, and whether the sum obtained was small or large, the end was nearly always the same. The feeling of horror and disgust which Hugh experienced when the full knowledge of his father's business dawned upon him baffles description, and by the frequency of his remonstrances, his father saw the mistake he had made in preparing him for the post he intended him to occupy. Still, he would not alter his plans.

"If you leave me I have done with you for ever," he said. "I will neither give you nor leave you a shilling."

Dr. Gresham knew this, and while he secretly sympathized with the young fellow, he always tried to make him more contented with his lot. Now, however, at the age of twenty-two he had done what he had so often threatened, and the doctor did not know what to say to him.

"If his father meant to make a swindler of him he should not have given him the education and companionship of gentlemen," he thought angrily.

"Marjorie Durant is at the bottom of this, I suppose," he said after a pause.

"You will do me the justice to own I always objected to the business before I knew Marjorie," said Hugh quickly.

"Oh yes. But, nevertheless, it is she who has put the finishing stroke. May I enquire if you propose to marry Miss Durant on absolutely nothing a year, and whether she has consented to this wise arrangement?" asked the doctor sarcastically.

Bothwick reddened.

"No," he answered; "I don't propose to do that; but she would not marry me with twenty thousand a year earned in my father's office. Mr. Durant has no objection to me personally, but has a very strong one to my present occupation. As soon as I have a yearly income of four hundred pounds he will give me Marjorie."

He spoke with such hope, such trust and confidence, that the doctor had not the heart to laugh, as was his first impulse, though he knew the sooner Hugh was shaken out of his dream the better it would be for him.

"Four hundred a year! How do you imagine you can earn that? Hugh, can't you see that Mr. Durant was letting you down softly!—that such a proposition was really a refusal? You are too old to waste time in studying for a profession, even if you had the money to live while you were doing so, and you have neither capital nor experience with which to start any business. You paint very well; you can rattle off a few verses when you are in the mood; you waltz like an Austrian, and have a very fair baritone voice; but none of these accomplishments have any marketable value. Nothing remains but a clerkship, which means seventy-five pounds a year to begin with. My lad, my lad, you are throwing away your chances for a dream. How long do you suppose Marjorie Durant will wait for you? And do you think it right to ask her to do so?"

"I don't ask her. She is not bound in any way. It would not be right for me to wish it. But for all that, she knows how I shall work to win her; and she loves me and will wait," said Bothwick.

"I doubt it," said his host bluntly. "I have known her longer than you have, and I am an older man and have had more experience of men and women, and I say that Marjorie will soon forget you when she ceases to see you, and you will find one day that you have quarrelled with your bread-and-butter for the sake of a shadow."

"You may understand people in general, but you don't understand Marjorie," answered Marjorie's lover. "She is as far above all insincerity as——"

"As the angels? Don't say it, there's a good fellow, it has been said so often before," interrupted the doctor, while he thought: "Ah, these young people, with their faith and trust in human nature, and their hopes and enthusiasm! What a pity it cannot last. I don't say Miss Durant is not in earnest now," he said out loud, "or hint that she does not mean every word she says; but what is the good of that if she is equally sincere in the opposite direction this day month. Give it up, lad; stick to your father; throw away your dreams as stuff that will only burden you in your race; and presently marry some woman with more balance than this little butterfly. If you want to get on in the world you must be practical and commonplace."

"But I don't think I do want to get on in the world," answered Bothwick, smiling; "not in the way you mean. If I can earn enough to make a comfortable home for Marjorie I don't want anything more."

Dr. Gresham threw up his hands in despair.

"You young idiot!" he cried.

Hugh laughed.

"Ah, doctor!" he said, "that little bit of a girl's bright eyes hold all my world, and your commonplace young woman with more balance would frighten me to death. I want to win the girl I love for my wife, and not have one chosen for me by circumstances. I want my own place in the world, and to stand upright on my own feet. I want to hold out a helping hand to my fellows, and not to give them a push when they are already rolling down hill. I want to keep before me some of the bright and good