

Haughton. "Suppose you engage me, and dismiss old Tufton?"

Tufton proved to be out; so there was nothing for it but to agree to accept Mr. Haughton's good offices or to give up my practice. I hesitated for a few seconds, and then resolved upon the latter course.

"I shan't practice to-day," I said, as we retraced our steps towards the chapel.

"Do," urged Mr. Haughton; "do Miss Beresford. I should like to hear you play?"

"You hear me every Sunday," I said smiling.

"Yes, I know that; but then you are playing for everybody's benefit. I should like you to play for mine only. Oh, Miss Beresford," he continued, with some vehemence, "if you only knew—"

"I don't want to know," I interrupted desperately—"I don't want to know anything."

Whatever he might have intended to say was checked, not so much by my entreaties as by the sudden and timely appearance of my cousins John Vereker and Lina, who just then turned down the pathway leading towards where we were.

Nice behaviour! Nice conduct. Such a cunning piece of deception had never before come under her eyes; but she knew me now—that was one comfort—knew me thoroughly. So aunt Vereker informed me, when, after a protracted interview with Lina, she came into my room to confront me with my crime.

"I don't know what you mean, aunt," I said. "I really do not understand what I have done."

"Don't!" echoed aunt Vereker. "Don't! Why, your own conscience might tell you. You have deprived poor Lina of all she cares for in the world; you have lured Eustace Haughton away from her, just when he was on the verge of a proposal, by your quiet sneaking ways."

"—lured—Mr. Haughton! Oh, aunt, how can you say such a thing? I met him to-day by the purest accident."

"I am sure you did—an accident of daily occurrence," replied aunt Vereker. "Very accidental, no doubt! I suppose that is equally accidental!" and she threw down a letter addressed to me in an unknown hand.

"I should say that it was quite accidental; for I do not recognise the handwriting."

"Little serpent!" cried my aunt, as she turned to leave the room. "I wish you had never darkened my doors!"

How he must despise me if he thought I had laid myself out to entrap such a man as Mr. Haughton—I who had never given him a thought, far less dreamt of his preference! Yet there was his letter—for sure enough it came from him—hurried, but earnest in its entreaties to me to accept what he now offered—himself. He feared he had offended me; if he had, I must forgive him; and, if I could not give him my love all at once, he begged me not lightly to reject his, but give him the chance of winning mine.

Never was a proposal so unwarranted, never had one been so unwelcome. I sat quiet and speechless after perusing it, until roused by hearing the dressing-bell ring, which warned me that in half an hour I must meet them all at dinner.

Lina, tear-stained and indignant, was the first that greeted me; behind her was my aunt, vigorously fanning herself; whilst my cousin John was apparently buried in the study of the *Times*.

I approached them tremulously enough, and presently summed up courage to address to Lina a rather unintelligible remark as to my having feared that I was late for dinner, my watch being slow.

"Oh, you are in excellent time!" responded my aunt, who took the remark as addressed to herself. "We should have had to excuse you if you had been late."

A slight sob from Lina and a rustle of the *Times*, followed by the announcement of dinner, saved my having to reply. But what a dinner it was! The only voice was my cousin John's, who strove, vainly enough, to bring forward topics which might be generally and safely discussed. Once or twice he addressed me in a manner so pointedly that I could have broken down right there and then and sobbed my precious secret out at his feet, utterly regardless of aunt Vereker's or Lina's presence, both of whom sat in silent wrath, glancing towards me with the most unmistakable contempt and abhorrence.

Well, it would soon be over; for I could not stay long at the Grange. Very soon I should be gone; but whither? That was a question hard indeed to answer—a problem beyond my solving. I was very young. I

knew nothing of the ways of the world. I had no idea how far my own small means were capable of maintaining me. I was not sufficiently accomplished to be a governess; and, without having one shade of conceit about me, I knew I was too good-looking to pass through life in the obscurity which I began to desire for myself.

The vista before me was cold and chill and hopeless. A few lines of refusal having been duly despatched to Mr. Haughton, I sat in my own room reflecting on my future. Many were the projects I revolved ere I slept. These the morning sun dispelled, for they had not been of the wisest. However, with some trepidation I sought out aunt Vereker, and told her, as simply as I could, how-grieved and sorry I was, but how utterly unexpected Mr. Haughton's proposal had been.

"Not unwelcome, if unexpected," responded my aunt. "But I wish to tell you frankly that I think your behaviour has been simply abominable. Not that you probably will care for what I may say or think—as Mrs. Haughton, you will be in a position to do without my good opinion—but I wish to express it now to you, and to tell you at the same time how bitterly I regret having allowed you to come here at all."

"That I can quite believe," I answered, with some bitterness. "But you are in error if you think I am likely to become Mrs. Haughton."

My aunt laughed incredulously.

"You are not going to further impose upon me, Blanche. Don't imagine that I believe you intend to refuse such an offer."

"I have refused it," I replied laconically.

"You have refused it!" exclaimed my aunt. "Well, you are the best judge of your own actions; but may I ask, if it is true that you have refused Mr. Haughton, what was your object in detaching him from Lina?"

"I never detached him," I answered indignantly; "I never dreamt of his daring to propose to me!"

"Daring to propose! Really, Blanche, I wonder if you have any idea of your own position? By birth you may be entitled to marry a gentleman; but, considering your penniless—"

"I have fifty pounds a year, aunt," I said, "and I mean to live upon that. I am very sorry that I have so innocently distressed Lina; but I shall go away to-day—to-morrow—as soon as you like; and Mr. Haughton will do me the justice to tell you that it was no fault of mine."

"As if I would discuss it with him," uttered aunt Vereker; "and as if I could, in decency, allow you to go away! No, no; you must remain where you are until I can see you properly bestowed elsewhere; but, recollect, here you have brought nothing but unhappiness, and in this house your presence can never be welcome. I am only giving you an idea of what every one, from your cousin John downwards, thinks and feels in consequence of your conduct."

This was the final blow for me. A wild sense of the injustice, the cruelty of it all surged through me. Involuntarily I started up, and then sat down, faint and trembling, speechless with impotent wrath, shame, and sorrow.

"Please do not attempt any heroics. Blanche, I am not a person to be impressed by any exhibition of the kind;" and aunt Vereker got up, and, with a sneering glance towards me, left the room.

Mr. Haughton came no more to see us, and my cousin John departed to spend, first, a couple of months at his shooting quarters in Scotland, and afterwards, I gathered from what I heard, he went about paying visits. At all events, the Grange was not to see him until Christmas. How I longed for Christmas to come, and how I listened for any chance scrap of information touching the movements of my absent cousin!

One very dull, rainy morning in December there came a letter from him to aunt Vereker, headed from Grimby Castle, Lord Vandeleur's place in Shropshire, saying that he was now really en route for home, but that Lord Vandeleur had pressed him to remain for another week, so he would not appear at the Grange until the twenty-fourth—Christmas Eve.

"There must be some special attraction at Grimby," suggested Lina. "Isn't Miss Vandeleur a great beauty?"

"I believe she is," returned aunt Vereker; "but John isn't a marrying man, happily for us. He has often said he would never marry."

"That's the very reason he will," replied Lina petulantly. "A nice thing for us to

have to bundle out of this house and go off to some poky hole!"

"Don't do it yourself, Lina," said my aunt. "John isn't attractive enough to please the Honorable Miss Vandeleur. She expects to marry nothing under a duke."

"I hope she won't be disappointed," sighed Lina; "but I agree with you, mamma—more brightly. 'John isn't a beauty.'"

It was late when he arrived, looking browner and more stalwart than ever, and just as quiet, grave, and nice as he had been since I first saw him. I was very nervous when he advanced to shake hands with me. Perhaps my state of my mind accounted for the sudden pallor which must have overspread my face, for my cousin John said kindly—

"Blanche is not well, surely?"

"Oh yes, I am—quite well!" I said quickly.

"What is the matter?" asked aunt Vereker sharply, turning towards me just in time to see a burning blush covering my face. "I see no signs of illness."

"Don't you?" I heard my cousin John say; and then the lights began to flicker strangely, and vague noises like the rushing of many waters sounded in my ears. I made a wild stumble forwards, and then, failing to reach a friendly chair, was conscious of sinking downwards into darkness, and presently revived to find that I was being borne up-stairs in a pair of strong arms; and I recognized, bending over me as he laid me down, the face of my cousin John.

"She is better now," he said softly. "It was a fainting fit, I suppose. 'Has it happened before?'"

"Never," answered a voice which I knew was aunt Vereker's; and then cousin John went quickly from the room, leaving me with a bitter sense of humiliation and shame to recover.

What could they all think of me? I could fancy aunt Vereker setting my illness down to heroics and a desire to attract; I could imagine my cousin John himself being once more and for ever "disgusted," and Lina's innumerable suppositions as to what had caused the seizure. I lay there all the evening alone. Only once Beatrice came up, to see if I would have some tea, as I had missed dinner altogether.

No, I would have nothing—nothing at all; I was glad to be a martyr, as some sort of self-punishment for my weakness. As I had a dim hope my refusal might be made known to cousin John.

It was a wretched feeling, I owe; I should really have enjoyed a cup of tea immensely—still more should I have liked to have been down-stairs, instead of spending my Christmas Eve in such a miserable fashion. At last kind nature's sweet restorer closed my tired eyelids and banished my dreary thoughts; and, when I awoke, Christmas Day had fairly dawned.

Such a bright lovely day it was, the ground; and trees covered with snow; icicles were hanging in crystal glittering loveliness, and the great elm-tree branches were bowed with drifts of half-melted snow, which crumbled into powder when a bird lighted on a bough, or dropped gradually in soft fragments to the ground. All was still, white, and lovely when I looked out of my bed-room window, lit up as the landscape was by the reflection from the sun on the otherwise colorless scene.

Service was to be at eleven o'clock; so I hurried to the chapel to perform my duties there, not waiting to hear whether the rest of the party meant to follow or not. After the preliminary voluntary came that wonderfully beautiful hymn—

"Hark, the herald-angels sing
Glory to the new-born King!"

Then, standing up, I saw in the Grange pew aunt Vereker, Lina, Beatrice and my cousin John, whilst in the Brampton Thorpe one I beheld Mr. Haughton.

The latter's unexpected visit annoyed me more than I can say. I feared he might wait for me, and offend my aunt more than ever by attempting to renew his request. So, when the service was over, I remained quietly in the organ-gallery until I thought every one must have gone. At last I ventured out. How pale and silent everything was as I passed through the little churchyard—passed with hurried footsteps, rendered noiseless by the heavy snow—as noiseless as those which overtook me, for I heard no sound until the voice—not of Mr. Haughton, but—of my cousin John suddenly addressed me.

"What were you doing, Blanche?" he asked, "I thought you were never coming."

"I was arranging my things for the evening," I answered.

"I don't think you ought to play to-night," he said very kindly.

"Why not?" I asked, so brusquely that I was utterly disgusted with myself.

"You are not fit for it," said cousin John. "I did not know you had been ill when I was away."

"I wasn't ill. I never was better!" I exclaimed; but my face must have contradicted my words, he looked so incredulously at me.

"You weren't happy, Blanche. I know it; and I have a message for you which may make you happier. I have promised to deliver it to you, and to ask you to weigh it"—these last words said very slowly.

"Eustace Haughton told me to tell you that he has not accepted your answer as final. He hopes still; and I have promised to tell you so. It is my duty, Blanche. He is rich. I believe he is all that we could desire; and you must weigh matters well. There are advantages—"

"There may be," I interrupted, "many advantages; but I could not care for him, not even if—"

"If what, Blanche?"—and my cousin's voice was strangely changed.

"If I had seen no one I cared for more," I answered, with a desperate heedlessness of consequences.

"You love some one else then?"

"With my whole heart!" I answered.

And then there came a silence, a long awful silence, during which I noticed with strange acuteness the heavily-laden snow-covered palings and the bent branches of the fir-trees in the shrubbery.

"Can you name him? Blanche, is he worthy? Have compassion, Blanche—have compassion upon me!"

What words would convey the depths of happiness sounded on that snowy Christmas morning? What heart was so joyous or so thankful as mine, when it dawned upon me that cousin John had loved me from the first? But, from his imagining that the disparity in our ages was too great, and from other groundless causes, he never dreamt that his preference could be returned.

Six weeks after that we were married and I am happy to say Mr. Haughton not only got over his disappointment, but consoled himself not long afterwards by marrying, not Lina, but a Spanish-looking beauty who looks down with great condescension on Mr. and Mrs. John Vereker.

So my eventful Christmas Day ended in being a merry one. And I cannot do better for my friends than wish them as merry a one, and as happy a New Year, and many of them, as I find and have fallen to my own share.

Too Much at Home.

It is surprising how soon a wife tires of the company of a man who is too much at home. Men are wise in getting away from their own roof-trees a certain portion of each day. Among their wives will be found a very general consensus of opinion to this effect. There will be found everywhere a disposition to pack off the men in the morning, and bid them to keep out of the way till toward evening, when it is assumed that they will probably have a little news of the busy world to bring home, and when baby will be sure to have said something exceptionally brilliant and precocious. The general events of the day will afford topics of conversation more interesting by far than if the whole household had been together from morning till night. A very little inquiry, too, will elicit the fact that men about home all day are eminently apt to be fidgety and grumpy and interfering—always objectionable, in short. This is the case very often, even with workmen of genius—authors, or parsons, or painters—but it is particularly apt to be so with the unemployed, such, for instance, as business men who have retired, or who are out of the harness for a short time. The spirit of mischief is never at a loss for a job for pater-familias if it catches him idling and lounging about, neither at work nor at play. It stirs up his bile and irritability, very likely, and incites him to the reform of domestic abuses. It kindles his sanitary ardour, and sends him poking and sniffing about inconveniently into all the odd corners of the establishment; or sets him about the curtailments of house-keeping extravagance, or the amendment of various unmethodical household procedures;

She neglects her heart who studies her glass.