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TANGLED THREADS

"When one goes down deep into the valley of the shadow," one sees one's own life from a different standpoint," she huskily returned. "Only a little more than a year ago, John, I thought the end had come for me, and I began to realize what sad mistakes I had made and to feel more kindly toward the woman whom I had once said I would never forgive—yourself among the number."

"Do you mean it, Margaret?" cried a man, a great joy quivering through his tones; "can you at least forgive me for my mad and selfish love for you, for allowing myself to be hoodwinked by a base woman into knowing, as I did, I might have known, if I had stopped to reason, that you would never be disloyal to the vows you had taken, that you would never encourage me or consent to receive me privately, as was represented to me that you wished to do. I have never ceased to lament my folly nor to yearn for your pardon."

"It is yours, John; I freely put all the past behind me, and sincerely regret the spirit I manifested when we met two years ago," said Mrs. Lancaster, with a sigh. "Your noble work for the unfortunate, the good you have accomplished in this house, for the poor girl whom we tried to benefit, together with your delicate and generous provision for us when we were in such sore need, have shown me that I have misjudged you. Besides, smiles beginning to dimple her cheeks, 'happiness is a great leveller of all differences, and I am now very, very happy, John.'"

"Margaret! do you mean that you

have found—your—began John Wilton, with trembling lips. "Yes, Hal and I have at last found and become reconciled to each other, after all these years," she said, with shining eyes that told their own story. "You must come to see us, John—we are at the Waldorf—and be friends again with him. He knows all the truth now; he never knew of Marlen's agency in that dreadful affair until I told him recently, and he will be glad to show you that he realizes that he was rash and unjust, as well as I."

"Will he?" queried John Wilton gravely, and Margaret could feel that he was trembling from head to foot, for he still held her hands. "Ah!" she said deprecatingly. "I remember what hard things he said to you that day, but—suppose you had been in his place, John? Perhaps he will take the first step; perhaps he will come to you, if you will receive him," she pleaded. "I am so happy myself I want all the world to be happy and at peace also," she concluded, with a yearning sigh.

The man before her bent and reverently touched the hands he was holding, then released them, and as he did so there shone upon his face a look of softly self-renunciation that almost made Helen, who had been a deeply moved witness of the foregoing scene, weep.

"Margaret, to see you happy once more, to see this look upon your face that you wore as a girl, is a boon that I would long ago have given my dearest, if I could only have hoped to achieve," he said, smiling frankly into her uplifted eyes, even though he was very white about the mouth. "I will come to the Waldorf to see you," he added, "tomorrow, perhaps, if that will be agreeable to you."

"Thank you, John, thank you; yes, come," Margaret responded, but with a sob in her throat, for something in his face and voice made her heart ache. Mr. Wilton then turned from her to

Helen, whom he began to fear he was neglecting.

"I remember you well, Miss Helen—Miss Lancaster, I suppose I must call you now. We met at Mrs. Sturdy-vant's in the Adirondacks; but I did not dream that you were the daughter of one who had been very dear to me from childhood," he observed, his eyes lingering upon her lovely face.

"I have not forgotten you, Mr. Wilton," Helen began, and would have said more, but her mother laughed out musically and checked her.

"Helen," she said, "we must not allow you to be 'missed' any more today. John, my daughter became Mrs. Robert Eggleston a week ago last Wednesday, and whom do you suppose the young man is?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Mr. Wilton, smiling at the young bride's blushes.

"Well, she met and became fond of him years ago, when they were in the high school together, and—she has turned out to be Hal's nephew, whom he has reared as a son," Mrs. Lancaster explained.

"How wonderful!" exclaimed her listener.

"Isn't it?—and romantic, too! But we really must go now. Come to the Waldorf in the afternoon, and you shall have the whole story in detail," said Margaret, moving toward the door.

John Wilton went down to the street with them, assisted them into their carriage, and watched them drive away, the fair woman waving back and smiling a friendly adieu to him as the vehicle turned the corner.

Then he went back to the little parlor and stood with bowed head upon the spot where she had held out her hands to him.

How long he would have remained there no one can say had he not been aroused by the ringing of the door-bell.

He started and passed his hand over his face as if awaking from a dream. "God bless her!" he whispered, with unsteady lips. "She has forgiven me! It has come late, but I thank Him that it has come at all."

CHAPTER XLIX.

John Wilton paid his call at the Waldorf the next afternoon, and was greeted in the most cordial manner by the man who had once cherished almost murderous thoughts in his heart toward him.

The clasp of their hands, as they met, told each that the bitterness of the past was buried forever—annihilated, in fact; and as they talked over the various incidents relating to their trouble, both felt that—even though they had been the tools of a cunning, designing woman—they needed to be forgiven for much that pertained to it.

Margaret had very little to say, but she sat listening with shining eyes and a look of peace and joy on her face that was good to see after the careworn expression of the past.

Rob and Helen had gone for a drive in the park, and thus there was nothing to hinder their talking everything over with the utmost freedom.

Nothing had so touched Mr. Lancaster in all his life as the story of how John Wilton had relieved the terrible necessity of his wife and daughter by the purchase of their cottage in the Adirondacks, the hiring of the suite, and his fatherly protection of the girl whom they had befriended.

It was an afternoon long to be remembered, and during which old friendships were renewed, and each heart was softened and purified by the acknowledgment of and sorrow for the wrongs of their youth; while throughout the Lancasters' stay in New York the trio had many friendly and pleasant reunions.

Mr. Lancaster and his party had arrived on Friday—having stopped over one day in Chicago on their way.

On Saturday morning that gentlemen repaired to his office, making the rounds and shaking hands cordially with each clerk, and inquiring in a friendly way regarding his welfare during his long absence.

When he came to Hubert Alton, the young man flushed hotly, briefly and coldly returning his greeting, then dropped his eyes again upon his work.

During the afternoon, on passing his desk again, Mr. Lancaster paused a moment and said in a low voice:

"Alton, I would like to see you in my private office for a few moments at 4 o'clock."

"Very well, sir," said Hubert, with a sudden compression of his lips. He appeared to be deeply musing the rest of the hour designated, and silently took the seat that his employer indicated.

"Alton," began the elder gentleman gravely, and coming to the point at once, "I have asked you to come here to tell you that I feel that you have done a great wrong. 'Yes'—as the young man started and flashed a look of astonishment upon him—"I placed a terrible temptation in your way, and I know it is my duty to acknowledge it and ask your pardon for it. Fortunately the plan I suggested to you was frustrated, and I find that the sum placed at your disposal in the First National Bank has never been called for."

"Of course not, sir. I had no right to it," cried Alton; but his voice shook, for the loss of that coveted ten thousand dollars had been a terrible blow to him, and had caused him many a sleepless night.

"That is true," said Mr. Lancaster, regarding him curiously for a moment. Then he added: "I understand that you have recently married the girl who alone should be your wife."

Hubert threw back his head and bravely faced his companion. "Yes, sir," he replied; "although for a long time I vowed that I never would. I am glad now, however, that I was

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led to do it, for I know that I should never have taken a moment's comfort if I had carried out my original purpose—even though I might have made millions out of the start you promised to give me. I confess I was fond of Miss Seymour," he went on, palling a trifle. "I had been for years, and I was tremendously jealous of Rob. For I knew that he had the best of me in the race. I know that the only reason why she finally consented to marry me was because she and her mother had reached the bottom of their purse, and she believed it was the only way to save Mrs. Seymour's life. I can see now that we all should have been wretched if the marriage had been consummated, and I am glad that it was interrupted, although it was a tough experience at the time. My wife is a good, true little woman, and the better I know her the more sorry I am that I did not do the right thing by her a long time ago."

Mr. Lancaster leaned forward and held out his hand to the young man. "Alton," he said, "I am more relieved than I can express to find that you have weathered this ordeal so creditably to yourself. I have hated myself ever since I yielded to the temptation that came to me, and then committed a double wrong by tempting you in the way I did. I not only forfeited my own self-respect, but yours also, and I have been fearfully punished. You will understand how severely when I tell you that I have recently discovered that Mrs. Seymour is my wife from whom a serious misunderstanding separated me many years ago—consequently, Helen is my own daughter."

"Sounds!" cried Alton, almost bounding from his chair at this amazing information, while, knowing of the letter and telegram which had fallen into Helen's possession, he could readily see how complicated matters must have become for Mr. Lancaster. "I never heard of anything to beat that!" he went on, "and you would never have forgiven me if I had succeeded in carrying out your purpose."

"I never should have forgiven myself—I am not sure, even now, as it is—for having ruined the happiness of my own child and that of Rob, as well," said the gentleman, with a sigh. "I have other news for you, too—they were married a little less than two weeks ago."

"Well, that is news!" exclaimed Hubert, and flushing. "How ever did it come about?"

"Rob and I stopped at Colorado Springs on our way home from Europe, by way of the Pacific, and there met Helen and her mother by accident, the latter having been sent there to recover her strength after her illness," Mr. Lancaster explained.

"Yes, I knew they were there," said Hubert. "Mary—my wife—to whom they were very kind, has written to and heard from them several times."

"Of course, after discovering them, explanations followed, and all misunderstandings were set straight. Now, my young friend," Mr. Lancaster continued, after a moment of thought, "I feel that I owe you some reparation, for the wrong I so nearly let you into; full reparation, I know, is beyond my power to make, but from what you have told me, you are sure you will eventually rise above the influence of it, and now, as a proof of my regret, I am going to make over to you that ten thousand dollars that still lies in the First National Bank."

"No, sir! I will not have it!" indignantly exclaimed Alton, as he started to his feet. "It has been too much of a temptation to me already. After I was shown up in my true colors I was even tempted to make the most of that marriage license and draw the money. I told myself it would be easy enough to do it, and before long I was discovered, and start a good business for myself in some other country. I fought that suggestion of evil as I would fight for my life, and I only conquered it by holding on to the memory of my mother, to whom the commandment—'Thou shalt not steal'—was about the most sacred one in the catalogue. No, sir! I do not want that money," he continued, more calmly. "I will work for you, and work faithfully, if you will retain me in your service; but if I am ever to rise to financial success it shall not be upon the foundation—pardon me, Mr. Lancaster, but I must say it—of a bribe."

"I deserve that, Alton," said his employer, with a sigh, "and I can but honor you for the stand you have taken—it has lightened my heart more than I can tell you, for it assures me that I have not been the means of corrupting you as much as I feared. But really, you must let me ease my conscience in some way. Will you allow me to settle the amount upon your wife or child as—as a kind of thankoffering?"

Hubert's face lighted, and he shot a look of gratitude at his companion, in view of this thoughtful proposition. "Well, Mr. Lancaster, that puts the matter in a somewhat different aspect," he said, after thinking hard for a moment. "If you choose to give it to Mary, I shall be glad for her to have it; only it must be made over to her, so that I cannot touch it."

"I will fix that," said the gentleman, smiling at the stipulation, "and now—rising and holding out his hand; again, while he looked kindly into the young man's bright face, "I am sure that you will and will both feel lighter of heart for this talk; we will never speak of the matter again, but we will let it be a lesson to us for all time. You will remain with me as long as you like and continue as faithful to my interests as I am convinced you have been, and your salary is to be increased two hundred dollars per annum."

Hubert gripped the hand he held hard, and then, with a broken "Thank you, Mr. Lancaster," turned abruptly and left the office.

"He is a good man," she said to herself, and somehow felt as if she had gained a little nearer to her father on account of it.

Mr. Lancaster found business pressing so heavily upon him that he began to fear that he would not be able to get through with it as early as he had planned, and as he was determined not to keep his youngest child until cold weather came upon them, he asked him if he would be willing to attend to a little missionary work for him.

"I should like nothing better, dear," she eagerly responded.

He accordingly gave her a list of his pensioners and of the work that he had laid out for himself, and her face grew luminous with tenderness as she read it over.

[To be Continued.]

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