THE BEAUTIFUL HAND.

Four maidens were sitting, one day,
Where sparkled a brook through the green,
And three were rich women, she I
Was only a maiden of the queen.
Work could not fill to display,
Their look of my sort and my arms;
Each thought as she hared them, and lay
Admiring themselves in the stream.
How graceful, how whitely they gleam.
No queen could wish fairer than they."

At length a discussion began
Whose hands the most beautiful were,
One flipped up the stream as it ran,
Till rain under finger was lit
With a diamond drop in the sun,
Like dew when the breeze is astir.

One plucked up the violets sweet,
Of midnight and golden light span,
Till fragrant her fingers became
As the wealth of the meadows they bore;
The third gathered berries of flame,
Till stained by their rude-plundered store,
Her fingers grew rosy with shame.

An old, hagged woman passed by,
Who begged for a gift, being poor.
The three rival maids cried "Not I,"
The fourth dropped a coin in her hand,
And wished it were more, with a sigh.
While gently the beggar she scanned.
"A judge," then cried one, "to be sure,
We'll ask the old hag to declare
Whose hand of the three is most fair."

Then slowly the beggar replied:
"Not here that is sweet with the bloom;
Not here that is pink with the fruit,
Not here that was dipped in the tide,
But here who gave bread to my salt,
Whose heart for sweet pity found room,
The hand that gives alms to the poor
Is the beautiful hand, to be sure."

She ceased—and stood sudden revealed,
An angel apparelled in white,
Amazed then before her they kneeled;
She smiled, with a smile like the dawn,
And lo, in an instant was gone,
Unseen in her heavenward flight.

—*Independent.*

THE Squire's Grand-daughters.

BY ROSA MULHOLLAND.

CHAPTER XX.

THE HAND WITHDRAWN.

On arriving next day to pay a visit at the Rue Sainte Barbara, Sir Harley Winthrop was more and more surprised at the shabbiness of the apartments of M. Dunois' choice. He found Miss Huntingtower, as usual, alone with her embroidery, Fifine having gone out for the day, this time to visit a married school-fellow, to relate to her the history of yesterday's triumph over Madame Vilaine.

Sir Harley thought Margaret looked pale and troubled. 'What does the old fellow mean,' he thought, 'by taking her out of London at such a time, to droop in a place like this?' And he began to remember that it had been always said that there was a mysterious cloud over M. Dunois.

'I had to take same pains to find the house,' he said, as he sat down opposite to Margaret. 'The truth is I was looking for something gayer as likely to be the abode of your party. M. Dunois has a sombre taste, I fear.'

'We were all surprised the morning when we arrived; but a friend had selected the rooms for us. He may have chosen them because of some associations. My grandfather was not always Squire of Amberwolds, you know, Sir Harley.'

'I know you are a loyal and true daughter, and will not have him blamed. As for the place, it already wins on me. Any place which Miss Huntingtower graces with her presence must soon get a sort of charm of its own.'

'Thank you. That is very pretty. I will keep that compliment to soothe myself with the next time my vanity is snubbed,' said Margaret laughing.

'I should not think of paying compliments to you,' said Winthrop, seriously; and then, fancying he scented a slight alarm in the girl's breath, for her dignity allowed no more palpable sign, he was warned not to go further at present, and immediately changed the conversation.

'I have a good deal of time on my hands,' he said, 'and I find that some friends of mine are absent from Paris. If you would allow me to be of your party when you go sight-seeing you would do a charity to a lonely individual.'

'We have not gone sight-seeing at all, but I should like it, of all things. It does seem a pity to go home without having seeing anything. There are so many places which I want to visit; old churches, palaces, and—and the Hotel Cluny!'

'Let us set out at once. Please put away that embroidery and come!'

'But everyone is from home but me. We cannot make up a party to-day.'

'No; true,' said Sir Harley, a little ruefully, wishing she might just put on her bonnet and come with him on the instant. The others would only be in the way. However, he was too well-bred a gentleman to dream of asking her to do anything that was not strictly conventional and proper. And so, after a good deal more conversation about London, about Sussex, about his stepmother and sisters, he took his leave, having first obtained permission to return in the evening.

'I must speak to M. Dunois about making up a party to see something of Paris. I suppose he is usually at home in the evenings?'

'Usually. And of course we shall be pleased if you will come.'

His surprise of the morning was slight compared to that which he felt when he entered the salon that evening and saw a number of men, who had little the appearance of gentlemen, smoking and playing cards at a table, with M. Dunois in their midst. Fifine was standing by her grandfather's chair, watching and applauding the game, and the Englishman thought that Margaret was not present. But after a few moments he discovered her, seated at the end of the room, stitching by her lamp.

His arrival was a real pleasure to her, as he saw. Filled the chair which she had been dreading to see occupied by M. de Vedrasse. She drew a deep breath of relief, and her welcome to him was warmer than it had been in the morning. Beholding wonder and dissatisfaction on Sir Harley's face as he glanced occasionally at the other end of the room, she said, playfully:

'You must not criticise, and you have not full sides. I have got old friends, and you can I have got much to talk about.'

'More old friends! I begin to think that when M. Dunois visits Paris he ought to leave his grandfaughters at home.'

Marigold stuck her hands. 'So long as he wishes for my presence I will stay by him; at least, so long as I have no nearer duties,' she added, with a slight blush, thinking of her marriage in the future. She longed to say, 'until Lance can take me home,' but she shrank from making such a startling speech.

Sir Harley was not quite displeased at the peculiar circumstances which seemed to throw her on him for amusement and companionship, and had forced her to be a little confidential with him. No one else from England was likely to find them out here, and her uneasiness in her present situation was, he thought, a secret between her and himself. If he had known of M. Dunois' plan he would easily have fallen in with it, glad, after a few weeks' courtship in and out the wonderful old places of Paris, to be allowed to marry her in one of those ancient sanctuaries she liked so much, all dim with age, and glorified with jeweled windows, and to take her away with him to Switzerland and Italy, *en route* for England and home. As a first step towards some such desirable consummation, he suggested a visit to the Hotel Cluny as a reasonable occupation for the next day.

'Grandfather cannot go, he is absorbed in his business, but he has just told us that our cousin Rene will be here to-morrow morning. And we shall be a party of four to go anywhere we please.'

'Excellent!' said Sir Harley, beamingly, 'and we must make the best use of our time. How much longer does M. Dunois remain in Paris?'

'I do not know,' said Margaret, a little absently, and with a ring of home-sickness in her voice which made Sir Harley more than ever resolved to keep his place at her side. He went away having scarcely spoken a word with M. Dunois, but having arranged everything for the following day with Margaret and her cousin. After his departure even Fifine was willing to retire for the night at once, having an assured prospect of a charming day's pleasure on the morrow, with a proper escort, and everything *comme il faut*. And the girls escaped to their rooms, Margaret locking the door and hurrying to bed for fear of a summons to return to the salon.

After the rest of the company had departed M. de Vedrasse lingered a few minutes to speak privately with M. Dunois. All the evening his face had been dark, and he had cast many lurid glances at the remote end of the room, where sat Sir Harley Winthrop in the place he had been accustomed to appropriate to himself.

'Is this Englishman, this Sir Winthrop, is he a suitor of Miss Margaret Huntingtower?' he asked abruptly of the squire.

'Nothing of the kind,' said M. Dunois, promptly; 'he is only an old neighbor. My granddaughter does not care in the least about him.'

'He cares about her, however,' sneered the general, 'and where men of position and wealth are concerned, that is infinitely more to the point. Would he be likely to become one of us, even to obtain the hand of Miss Margaret?'

'Not in the least,' said M. Dunois, emphatically.

'*Bon!*' said the general, between his teeth. 'In the case I have put, my duty to the society would compel me. But your assurance sets my scruples at rest. *A demain, mon ami.* You do not forget that the Council will meet at eleven o'clock.' And with an unpleasant gleam of satisfaction on his heavy features the general turned away from his bondman.

Rene appeared on the morrow morning, jubilant as a boy let loose from school, and perfectly happy, because it was not necessary to speak English in Paris. His dullness, his "oafishness" had vanished in his native atmosphere. Fifine delighted him by the warmth of her welcome. He was much more valuable to her here than in England, where she could amuse herself better without his help.

The day in the Hotel Cluny was a charming success. Sir Harley knew what was best worth looking at, and made himself the leader of the party. Margaret, delighted at having regained her liberty, knew by her sense of relief and freedom how pent up and lonely and anxious she had been. That morbid idea that her grandfather was losing his money, his property, to his evening card-playing guests, melted away in the warm sunlit air, and disappeared. Of course he was really detained in Paris by business, though of what nature that business might be it did not become her to inquire. If too much under the dominion of his unpleasant friend, the general, yet a little patience must release her, Margaret, from the painful state of things resulting from the squire's infatuation for his questionable friend. Once they were back again in England all would be well. In France M. de Vedrasse might put on the airs of a master; at Amberwolds, in London, his manners would necessarily be changed. Following Sir Harley from one object of interest to another, gay, happy and trusting, Margaret felt that she should henceforth owe a deep debt of gratitude to their amiable neighbor for delivering her from the captivity of irritating circumstances.

In her letter to Lance, descriptive of that day, she was eloquent in the praise of Sir Harley Winthrop. 'Grandfather is so busy,' she wrote, 'that we should see nothing of Paris, only for the kindness of this friend. Nothing could be nicer than his way with Fifine and me. He is more like a brother or a cousin than a recent acquaintance, and then he knows a little about everything, etc., etc. He is so different from everyone we have met since we quitted London. It was a fortunate chance that brought him here.'

But Dangerfield in his chamber, biting his lip over the letter, was not sure that he was enchanted at Margaret's satisfaction with Sir Harley in Paris. He was beginning to feel that he should be jealous, and to blame Marigold for her readiness to take everything on trust. A brother, indeed, or a cousin! He had not looked much like a brother at that afternoon tea in London. And so he had followed them straight off to Paris! Would Margaret ever have eyes to see things plainly as they were? With Rene, dull though he might be, to take them sight-seeing, why need they be cast upon the services of the owner of Gonsley? For a few moments Lance thought he would throw over an important case and run across to Paris. But for what? Only to look jealous and suspicious. No, if he could not place implicit trust in his Marigold, then who was there trustable on the face of God's earth? And Sir Harley must take care of himself.

On his next evening visit to the Rue Sainte Barbara Sir Harley found he general occupying the seat he had hoped to find empty by Margaret's side at her table in the corner. Though not so keen in his perception as Lance, Winthrop saw that Margaret was not comfortable in her *tete-a-tete* with her grandfather's friend, and by her quick smile of welcome discerned that he himself was not an undesired intruder. He took possession of another seat opposite M. de Vedrasse, and began to speak, getting easily from the weather in England to the walking tour of some friends on the Alps; and Margaret, who had been sitting mute and looking bored, soon lighted up and conversed with animation.

In proportion as she brightened the General de Vedrasse became dark, and, after a long and gloomy lapse into silence, he looked up and said abruptly to Sir Harley:

'When do you think of returning to England?'

'I do not think of it at all,' smiled Sir Harley.

'Do you intend, then, to spend your life in Paris?'

'I did not say that. I mean that I have not begun to think about the date of my return. It will depend altogether upon—'

'What?' said M. de Vedrasse, glancing at Margaret from under his brows.

'Circumstances,' said Sir Harley, carelessly.

The conclusion which Margaret had reached with a bound, on meeting the general in Paris, Winthrop was arriving at, gradually and slowly, in his own way—the conclusion that this person was not the gentleman he had appeared to be when visiting at Amberwolds. Sir Harley went so far as, mentally, to call him a brute, and to wish fervently that he could venture to kick him out of Margaret's presence. But prudence restrained him from such a violent demonstration of disgust. He therefore simply continued his conversation with Miss Huntingtower, making unusual efforts to render it agreeable and entertaining, and ignoring the lowering face at the other side of her chair.

Hour followed hour, and neither the general nor Sir Harley showed any sign of moving, each being apparently determined to out-stay the other. Marigold, at last, feeling a gradual increase of electricity in the air, began to ask herself how best she might behave, so as to prevent the danger of their quarreling; for, though Sir Harley was the most good-tempered of men, an expression had been growing in his eye for the last half-hour which made her fear to see him show himself in quite a new light. His occasional glance at the general began to frighten and distress her; and she suddenly cut the knot of her difficulty by declaring that she was tired. She would ask them to excuse her if she must leave them to the company of her grandfather and his friends. And she rose to withdraw from the room.

Sir Harley's smile assured her that he was willing to be dismissed, in order to procure her release; and the general's scowl she did not heed. After she had left him, Winthrop walked to the upper end of the salon and remained for some time watching the card-players. The general stalked up and down the lower part of the room for some minutes, deep in thought; and then, shaking himself up, followed the baronet's example. Upon this the game came abruptly to an end and the company began to disperse.

M. de Vedrasse took a seat close to M. Dunois and, when all were gone but Sir Harley and himself, said: 'Will you tell your friend [to M. Dunois] that I wish to have some private conversation with you?'

M. Dunois' thin face flushed. It was hard upon him to have to ask Sir Harley to go out of his house. But he was spared that pain.

'Do not let me interrupt you for a moment,' said the Englishman. 'Anything I have to say will keep for another time.' And he bade 'good-night' and went.

As soon as he was gone the general said roughly, 'At all events, I have sat that fellow out. And now send for Margaret while we smoke.'

M. Dunois turned deadly pale, and for a moment looked as if he would have struck this ancient friend upon the face; but, recovering his presence of mind, he went out of the apartment. Returning, after four or five minutes, he said, with twitching lips:

'I have used all my persuasion, and she will not come.'

The general sat perfectly motionless and silent for some moments; then started up suddenly and buttoned his coat.

'*Eh, bien!*' he said quietly. 'She will not come? M. Dunois, I wish you a very good night's rest.'

After this evening Sir Harley Winthrop's manner to Margaret became changed. He had hitherto restrained his tenderness, wishing to give her plenty of time to grow accustomed to his friendly care and devotion before venturing to present himself to her in the guise of a lover. Now, however, it seemed she was so harassed by these strange companions whom her grandfather had thrust upon her—above all, by that one whose presence she so evidently found intolerable—that she needed a lover's interference, a husband's protection. Throughout the next day's pleasure-seeking, which he enjoyed in her society, there was some indescribable alteration in his face and voice which made Margaret take fear into her heart on his account; and all that night she lay wide awake, trying to contrive what should seem a natural occasion for making him positively aware of her engagement. But the more she tested her ingenuity the more difficult the task became.

One fixed purpose was in her mind, however. She never spare him the pain of being rejected by her. At whatever cost to herself, he must be prevented from making her a proposal of marriage.

They were walking through the galleries of the Louvre, and were discussing the deep blue atmosphere in a picture of 'The Holy Family,' by Titian.

'We English, with our cool, gray skies, can scarcely be just to a painter of such air; but when you come to Italy you will know that this is true.'

Something in his way of saying 'when you come to Italy' seemed to mean that he hoped to bring her there himself, and to make her happy with his love under the canopy of such sapphire skies. This meaning was in his mind and he put it in his voice.

Margaret's heart began to throb, and she felt that something was now coming which must never be allowed to come; and, with a desperate effort she struck out blindly to ward it off.

'By the way, when do you return to the land of these cold, gray skies?' she said hastily. 'You spoke of staying in Paris a week, did you not? If you are going soon, perhaps you would kindly take a parcel to a friend for me?'

'I am not going soon; but perhaps I can have your parcel sent, if you will give me the name and address of your friend.'

'It is only a book,' said Margaret, growing hotter every moment; 'a book which I promised to send to Mr. Dangerfield.'

'Do I know Mr. Dangerfield?' asked Sir Harley, remembering to have once seen a colonel of that name at Amberwolds, a nice old gentleman, who might lend books to Miss Huntingtower.

'If you do not, I hope you will some day,' said Marigold, as, having conquered her visible agitation, she stood looking at, but not seeing, the picture before her. 'Mr. Dangerfield is the man to whom I am engaged to be married.'

Sir Harley was silent for a few moments, and Margaret felt, rather than saw that he had got a shock.

'Indeed!' he said, in a constrained voice.

'Yes,' said Margaret, 'we have been engaged for more than two years. I thought every one knew.'

'I did not know.' The tone in which this was said conveyed reproach.

'I thought you did. I had reason to believe you did,' faltered the girl; and then they both stood silently gazing at one point, filling the blue atmosphere of Titian's picture with their thoughts, till blue seemed the very color of embarrassment.

After a few minutes of painful musing, Sir Harley made an effort to pull himself together after the shock of his disappointment.

'Then this is the reason you have been so frank and friendly with me, so glad to see me, so much like a friend, that I feared to ask you to become something nearer to me. It was because you were already engaged, and thought I was aware of the fact?'

'Yes.'

'My dear, don't look so very sorry for me. I may speak to you like this, because I am so much older than you. You have nothing to be so distressed about. You never encouraged me. It was only my ignorance of your circumstances that led me to hope.'

'I fear I must have been somewhat to blame,' said Margaret, with grieved eyes.

'I will not allow you to say so; though I own that I have got a wound that will be very sore.' His brow contracted with pain and he was silent for another minute. 'And now, may I ask,' he continued, 'where is your lover, that he does not stand by you here, and take you out of your present unpleasant surroundings?'

'He is in London,' said Margaret quickly, lifting her head with spirit at the hint or anything like blame to Lance. 'He is a barrister, who is bound to his courts. He is not a wealthy man, Sir Harley; he is working for me.'

'He ought to leave his work now and come here, either to watch over your comfort or to insist upon your grandfather bringing you home.'

'I will not have him leave his work,' said Margaret. 'It would be unfair to his interests, and interfere with his career. He is immensely clever—and ambitious, as he ought be. I do not tell him of every little worry that annoys me. He and my grandfather dislike each other; I will never do or say anything to widen their mistrust.'

'I see,' said Sir Harley slowly. 'Nevertheless, do not allow this good intention to carry you too far. Take my advice and send for Mr. Dangerfield to come here. As for me, I find I must go away to-morrow for a run into Italy. And, my dear, for the future, let your engagement be publicly known. You are too lovable to go about among men who do not understand that you are not to be won.'

How the rest of the day went over Margaret scarcely knew. She felt abashed, humiliated, troubled. She had been tried and found wanting, proved before her own eyes to have been the cause of pain to one who had been good to her. But when she lay down to rest that night two consoling thoughts got uppermost in her mind.

(TO BE CONTINUED).

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