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Astbury's Bargain.

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CHAPTER VI.—REPARATION.

The Overton Park carriage was at the gate of Cedar Cottage, and the footman was at the door respectfully awaiting the commands of Mrs. Silverton. The carriage had been sent from the Park by Mrs. Dacon to bring her mother and cousin to the grand juvenile fete which was to celebrate the fifth birthday of Mr. and Mrs. Dacon's only child, little Hetty. The widow liked to have the Overton carriage with its two fine bays standing in front of her house, and to have the footman in his quiet yet conspicuous livery standing at her door; and whenever she was sent for, contrived to keep the equipage waiting some time. On this occasion there was an extra delay, which was not Mrs. Silverton's fault, but Daisy's.

When ready to start, the postman had delivered a letter from Gilbert. It informed her that he had arrived in Liverpool, and was just starting for London, of course travelling under the name by which he was now known. He intended to make his way to the Cottage, and begged her, if she should be going out, to leave a message appointing an early hour for a meeting. Certain information had reached him which explained Dacon's strange illness, and he was most anxious to talk to her about it.

Daisy had not concealed from Aunt Silverton the correspondence with Gilbert; but as any communication between Cedar Cottage and "that young man" was entirely disapproved of, she did not tell her much. Consequently, she was at a loss how to act in the present juncture, being excited by the unexpected intimation of Gilbert's speedy arrival. His sudden return plainly indicated that some calamity was about to befall the Master of Overton Park. She determined to say nothing to her aunt until she had seen Gilbert, and simply left a note with the housemaid for "Mr. Harrison" telling him where a message would find her.

"I never knew you to take so long to dress before, Daisy," exclaimed Mrs. Silverton as she lay back in the carriage with a delightful sense of her own grandeur and importance; "and yet it is only a children's party."

The fete was to be a grand one. Dacon had attended to every detail himself, determined to produce for his child a scene of fairy wonders which should transcend all the pictures in the *Arabian Nights*. The autumn tints of the foliage on the Park trees were to lend their aid to the effects produced by the thousands of Chinese lanterns which were cunningly hung throughout the grounds; and a grand display of fireworks was to close the amusements of the young people after they were tired of dancing and feasting, and the home-bearing carriages were arriving.

Five-year-old Hetty was at the top of the lawn, receiving her numerous tiny guests and their grown-up guardians with as much composure as if she had been a queen accustomed to levees. Her father had made so much a companion of her that she was old-fashioned and self-possessed without being rude or obtrusive—a rare combination in a child. The only irritability she displayed was when she turned to her mother with the repeated question: "But where is papa? He promised to be here early, and he always comes at the time he says he will."

"He is late," said Mrs. Dacon, standing behind her daughter and looking anxiously down the avenue. "But, my dear, he cannot always leave the office at a fixed hour."

Then the fun commenced; and the bands of merry youngsters were conducted through the shrubbery to the tennis-ground, which had been transformed into a miniature fair. There were swings and merry-go-rounds, a Punch and Judy show, a marionette show, a conjurer's and a fortune-teller's tents, and a fancy fair of toys of every description, to be distributed according to the number taken from a wheel-of-fortune at the entrance for every passer to dip into and draw out a ticket. Besides all this, there was a brass band playing with brassy loudness all sorts of merry tunes to make hearts glad and feet patter chirpingly on the smooth grass.

And so, when the fun was at its height, papa came home looking very weary and haggard. He did not go out into the midst of the merry throng, but went straight up to his bedroom and sent for his wife. "Don't make any fuss, dear," he said when she came; "but I am too ill for anything except going to bed. I want to get a sleep. Maybe I will waken up refreshed enough to join the party. Go on with our arrangements as if there was nothing the matter. Promise me that."

"Of course, Henry; but you look so ill I must send for the doctor."

"Nonsense, my dear; I shall be all right after a nap."

"Papa, papa!" cried little Hetty, who had somehow discovered his arrival and rushed into the room, her bright amber hair touched by the rays of the setting

sun and looking like gold. "I am so glad you are here. Do come and see how the beautiful dollies are moving about just like real people."

He took her up in his arms and kissed her—he seemed to gasp as he held her to his breast. "Yes, darling, I will see the dollies by-and-by."

The child kissed him, wondering that he should refuse to join her immediately in the play as she requested. He had never done so before.

"You won't be long, papa," she said, moving hesitatingly away; "the dollies are so beautiful and look so real!"

"No, not long, pet. But you must go now—I am so tired." He kissed her again and again, seeming to gasp for breath as he did so. The child with a pretty toss of the head and a merry laugh, skipped away to mingle with her blithe companions in the pleasure so lavishly provided for them.

"I want to have a sleep, Hetty," he said very tenderly to his wife; "you know I have not had any for many nights; but I feel drowsy now. So, as the doctors say I must sleep if there is to be any chance of recovery, you will not on any account try to waken me if you should find me in a doze.—There now, go, and do what you can to make the little folk happy, and let me rest."

The wife very reluctantly left him to return to her duties as hostess; but she found it difficult to smile, although the merry shouts of laughter filled the atmosphere with a sense of unclouded joy.

The twilight was fading into darkness when the fireworks were started, and three huge rockets ending in variegated sprays of blue and red inaugurated the programme. Before the first stick fell, a footman found Daisy, and informed her that Mr. Harrison desired to see her.

She immediately followed the man in the direction of the house, but had only gone about a score of paces when she saw a gentleman advancing towards her. She felt her hand grasped with a fervour which sent a thrill of pleasure through her veins and brought the hot blood into her cheeks. That was Gilbert's grasp; but the sensation it produced was somehow different from what it used to be. In bygone times she used to tremble with the delight of touching his hand, because she believed it could never be her own. Now it seemed as if by some occult influence he had conveyed to her mind the impression that the hand was her own and brought with it a true and undivided affection.

"You are not sorry to see me here again?" he said.

"I am very glad. It is what I have always wished; but your last letter frightened me."

"Let us cross the lawn to the beeches. We can talk there without interruption.—Will you take my arm?"

The acquiescing action was his answer; and they passed quietly into the shadow of the trees, where the glaring lights of the fireworks, now in full progress, could not discover them to the guests, even if the guests had not been too much preoccupied by the brilliant display to think of peeping into shady nooks.

"I do not know how to prepare you for what I have to say," Gilbert began, while he tried to see her face in the shadow. "I had a letter from Dacon, which read beside your last, telling me of his strange illness and of—there was the briefest hesitation before he pronounced the name—"and of Mrs. Dacon's anxiety, determined me to get back to London as quickly as steamers and trains could carry me."

Daisy observed with satisfaction that he spoke of "Mrs. Dacon," not Hetty, as it used to be; and of course it was right that he should do so. But she pretended not to observe the change.

"What did he tell you that could alter your resolution so suddenly? Hetty is only unhappy on his account, and is in no need of your help."

"It was as much my thought of you that brought me back as my concern for Dacon."

"For him?" she interrupted. "Then it was not Hetty?"

"Oh yes, for her too, and I fear what may happen to her. Dacon's letter told me that he was absolutely ruined."

"He ruined?" she exclaimed, utterly unable to grasp the possibility of such a thing.

"Yes; the bankruptcy of the great house of Elliott & Co. will be announced in a few days."

"I do not understand. How he can have lost such an enormous fortune?"

"This is easily done by a man who confesses himself to have been a mad gambler from the moment when he first had the power to juggle with stocks and shares, and with such desperate ventures as no one in his senses who had anything to lose would touch. He says he was insane, and now realizes it when too late to retrieve himself. I have his permission to tell you everything, or I would not tell even you, Daisy, that it was this mad passion that led him to perpetrate the frauds, from the consequences of which he was first screened by my flight, and then saved by the sudden death of his uncle, which gave him the means to take up all the forged bills. But even that terrible lesson did not cure him. As soon as his hands were free, with the whole capital of the firm under his control, he lost every glimmer of reason and business knowledge he ever possessed, and now he says nothing can save him."

"And Hetty—poor Hetty—what is to become of her?"

"She will not be poor so far as money is concerned.

He tells me that the one consolation he finds in the midst of the wreck he has made is the assurance that, no matter what happens to him, his wife and daughter are provided for. The marriage settlements were made when he was perfectly solvent, and they give to her Overton Park with a sufficient income for its maintenance. The creditors cannot touch the settlements."

"But you, Gilbert—how will this affect you?" was her next eager inquiry. "Will you be safe? Will you be cleared of all blame?"

"I do not know. However, it seems that he has told everything to Mr. Ardwick, who has promised to protect me from any charge in connection with the forgeries, and I will see him to-morrow. Dacon's chief object in telling me this was to persuade me to yield to his prayer that the knowledge of his crime might be kept from his wife and daughter, if possible. I mean to try and keep them in ignorance of it, and I want you to help me."

"I will do whatever you think should be done."

"Ah, then—Daisy!—you will come back with me to Rio."

She had no desire to resist the pressure of his hand! as he drew her close to him and kissed her. She had no time to wonder then how it came to be that she was not more surprised at finding herself lifted in a moment from the ranks of the "unattached" to the blissful heights of the Betrothed; she had no time to wonder then how it all came to be settled in such a simple way and everything understood between them with so few words—no time, for they were started by the furious clatter of horse's hoofs passing at full gallop down the avenue, from which they were screened by the beeches and shrubbery.

The band was playing one of Strauss's gayest melodies, and the children were shouting in wild glee at every new marvel of the firework display, and yet Daisy and Gilbert heard that horse's hoofs as distinctly as if there had been perfect stillness, around them, and every stamp was like a loud bugle-note of alarm in their ears.

"There is something wrong at the house! cried Daisy with instinctive dread. "That man is going for the doctor. Come, Gilbert; we must help her."

He knew that she meant her cousin, and they were speedily convinced that she stood in sore need of help.

The anxious wife had at intervals stolen away from her guests to see how her husband fared. He seemed to be sleeping so soundly that she feared every fresh outburst of merriment, lest it should awaken him. By-and-by she was rendered uneasy by his stillness, for he did not seem to breathe. She touched him, and he did not stir. "Henry!" she whispered tenderly in his ear; but he made no response. Then, becoming alarmed, she raised his arm, released it, and it fell lifeless by his side. She uttered a shriek of horror and anguish as she fell upon the bed beside the man she loved and believed to be so noble. The cry attracted a servant, who at once brought Mrs. Silverton. That lady's dismay did not prevent her from promptly taking the practical measures necessary under the circumstances. She sent for the doctor, and had her insensible daughter removed to another room, where Daisy presently came to assist in waiting upon her.

On the arrival of the doctor, he said he could be of no service to Mr. Dacon, who had been dead for two hours at least; the cause of death was prussic acid. So Henry Dacon was consistent to the last, and sought escape from the consequences of his follies at any cost save that of manfully enduring them.

In Dacon's private desk was found a packet addressed to Gilbert Astbury, containing two documents. The first was a plain acknowledgment of his guilt, and a full explanation of how the frauds for which Gilbert had been blamed were perpetrated. As a partner in the firm, Dacon had the right of endorsing bills, and he had forged the names of the correspondents who were supposed to have drawn them. In the ordinary course of business, Gilbert had got the bills discounted and received the money, which he handed to Dacon. Then it stated why Gilbert had agreed to screen him at the sacrifice of his own good name. "But his sacrifice has been a torture to me," the confession of the miserable man went on. "I did hope to retrieve everything by my daring speculations and to restore Astbury to his right position. I failed. Great as was the fortune left me, I have lost it all."

The second paper was a letter to Gilbert, in which the writer stated that he had now made the only reparation in his power, and left him free to make any use of it that might best satisfy him. He only expressed the wish of a dying man that some way might be found to keep his wife and child in ignorance of the past.

Gilbert showed the papers to Daisy; and before he had told her what he intended to do, she said in her calm, wise way: "We will put these things out of sight, and say nothing about them, Gilbert. You are safe, and that is enough for me. Hetty is well off thanks to the marriage settlements, and that should satisfy"—she was going to say "you," but arrested herself and said—"us all.—But do you think you can forgive me for being wicked and spiteful about something?"

"I don't know," he answered, smiling as he looked into those clear blue eyes.—"What are you spiteful about?"

"I cannot help wishing Hetty to know that all the time whilst she was abusing you for blaming Dacon,