

UNCLE MAX.

CHAPTER XXX.—Continued. Yesterday, at this time, I was sitting in poor Robert Lambert's whitewashed attic, listening to the sparrows that were twittering under the eaves. When I had left the cottage I had walked down country roads, meeting nothing but a donkey-cart and two tramps.

Jill, as we left the school-room and proceeded down-stairs arm in arm. "I never think of her as my governess; she is just a kind friend who helps me with my lessons and walks with me. We do have such cosy times together. Does not the school-room look nice, Ursie?"

"Very nice indeed, my dear." "So I think; but Sara says it is horrid. She has made mother promise to give me her room directly she is married. Sara has a beautiful piano there, and a bookcase, and all sorts of pretty things. It is a lovely room, and looks out over the Park. You know, and I am so proud of my study and my room."

"Your mother is very kind to you, Jill." "A wondrously kind—I mean very kind. Gypsy does so dislike that expression. Do you know, I think you two are rather alike in that? Gypsy is very unhappy sometimes, though. I have found her crying more than once when I have left her long alone; only mother does not know, and I don't mean to tell her, because she thinks people ought always to be cheerful. It was so sad that clergyman dying—the one she was to marry; his name was Maurice Compton. I saw the name in one of her books: 'Lillian Gillespie, from her devoted friend, Maurice Compton.'"

"My dear Jill, how long are you going to keep me standing in the hall? Clayton will find us here directly." "Yes, I know," but Jill showed no intention of moving; the prospect of cold tea did not excite her; "but I want to tell you something before you go in. Mother is certainly kinder to me than she ever has been; she says I am to drive with her very often, and that she shall take me to see picture-galleries. And father is going to buy a horse for me, because he says I ride so well that I may go with him, as a rule, instead of with a master; and—"

"You shall tell me all that presently," I returned, "for I am too tired to stand on this mat any longer. Are you coming, Jill? or shall I go in without you?" but of course I knew she would follow me. The room seemed full when we entered. Aunt Philippa was at the tea-table; Sara was sitting about the room from one guest to another. Uncle Brian, who was standing on the hearth-rug, put out his hand to me. "I am glad to see you back again, Ursula," looking at me with his cool, penetrating glance. Uncle Brian was never demonstrative. "I think the work suits you, to judge by your looks. Take this chair by you. And accordingly I placed myself under Aunt Philippa's wing, while Jill and a boy-officer with budding moustache waited on me.

The rest of the evening passed very pleasantly. I had a long conversation with Miss Gillespie in the inner drawing-room while Sara and Jill played duets; of course our subject was Jill. Miss Gillespie spoke most warmly of her excellent abilities and fine development of character. "She will be a very striking woman," she finished, when the last chords were played and a soft clapping of hands succeeded. "Whether she will be a happy one is more doubtful; she must not be thwarted too much, and she must have room to expand. Jocelyn wants space and sunshine."

I thought these remarks very sensible; they taught me that Miss Gillespie had grasped the true idea of Jill's character. There was nothing little about Jill; she never did things by halves; she either loved or hated. She was faithful to a fault. There was a massive freedom and simplicity about her that would guide her safely through all the world's pitfalls. "Space and sunshine," that was all Jill needed to bring her to maturity and fruition. Some girls may be trusted to educate themselves. Jill was one of these. The next morning Sara took possession of me. A great honor was to be vouchsafed me: I was to be treated to a private view of the tulle and wedding-presents.

I had exhausted my vocabulary of admiring epithets, and sat in eloquent silence, long before Sara had finished her display. It was like the picture of Pandora opening her box, to see the pretty creature opening the big, carved wardrobe to show me the layers of delicate embroidered raiment, muslin and lace and jewels, curious trinkets and wonderful gifts worthy of the Arabian Nights. "There were two rooms full of treasures that had been laid at her feet, and no doubt, like Pandora, Sara had the rainbow-hued hope lying amid the bridal gifts.

"That is very pretty, Ursula. I see you have caught the right idea. Jocelyn dear, you are overfilling that basket, and some of the stalks are showing." Miss Gillespie will give me some for you. Come, Grace, shall we see Sara's study?"

"Sara nodded and smiled at us as she led the way to the upper regions. Pandora was forever opening her box in those days; she was never weary of fingering her silks and satins.

"Now she has gone, let us rest a little," Jill exclaimed, letting her arms fall to her side. "Are you not tired of it all, Ursie dear? I get so giddy that I keep rubbing my eyes. I never knew weddings meant all this fuss. Why cannot people do things more quietly? If I ever got married I shall put on my bonnet and walk to the nearest church with father. What is the use of all this nonsense? It is like decking the victim for the sacrifice, to see all these roses and green leaves. Supposing we have a band of music to drown her groans while she is being carried to the altar, as they do in the tropics!"

Jill's speech recalled Mr. Hamilton's words most vividly. "Because two people elect to join hands for the journey of life, is there any adequate reason why all their idle acquaintances should accompany them with yramids and prancements, and all sorts of fooleries, just at the most solemn moment of life?" and again, "Till death us do part, can any one, man or woman, say those words lightly and not bring down a doom upon himself?"

Could I ever forget how solemnly he had said this? After all, Mr. Hamilton was right, and I think Jill was right too. When we had finished the flowers and brought in Aunt Philippa to see the effect, I left the others and went up to my room. I had been busy since the early morning, and I felt I had fairly earned a little rest.

The room that was still called mine had a side-window looking over the Park. Down below carriages were passing and re-passing; a detachment of Hussars trotted past; people were pouring out from the Albert Hall, some afternoon concert was just over; the children were playing as usual on the grass; the soft evening shadows were creeping up between the trees; the sky was blue and cloudless. May was wearing her choicest smiles on the eve of Sara's wedding-day.

Martha, the school-room maid, had brought me a cup of tea; the rest of the family were crowded in Uncle Brian's study; the dining-room was already in the hands of Gunters' assistants; the long drawing-room and inner drawing-room were sweet with roses and baskets of costly hot-house flowers; a bank of rhododendrons was under the hall window; the house was full of sunshine, flowers, and the ripple of laughter. I could hear the laughter through the closed door. Sara's musical tinkle rang out whenever the door opened; I had fallen into a sort of waking dream, when something white and golden passed between me and the sunlight; a light kiss was dropped on my drowsy eyelids, and there was Lesbia smiling at me.

She looked so cool and fair in her white gown, with a tiny bouquet of delicious teasers in her hand, her golden hair shining under her little lace bonnet. I thought she looked more than ever like Charlie's white lily, only now there was a touch of color on her face.

"Oh, Ursie dear, I am so pleased to see you!" she said, gently, as she took the flowers on my lap. "Clayton told me that every one else was in Mr. Garston's study, so I begged to run up here. We only came up from Ruthford this morning, and we have been so busy ever since. I was afraid you were asleep, for I knocked at the door without getting any answer, but no one was there; so you were only dreaming."

and tells me so much about their school life and college life together. He was so fond of Charlie, and the undergraduates used to call them 'Jamson and Pythias.' "To be sure, Charlie was always talking about Harcourt. He has grown very handsome, I have heard."

"Mother says so; he is certainly good-looking," she answered, simply; "and then he is so kind. I feel almost ashamed at troubling him so much with our business and commissions, but he never seems to mind any amount of trouble. I have never met any one so unselfish."

I turned away my head to hide a smile. Lesbia was quite serious. She was too much absorbed in the memory of Charlie to read the secret of Harcourt's smile; she was too generous, his kindly attentions and sympathy, had not yet awakened a suspicion of the truth.

One day Lesbia's eyes would be opened, and she would be shocked and surprised to find the hold that Charlie's friend had got over her heart; very likely she would divorce him and lock herself up in her room and cry for hours; probably she would persist for some weeks in making herself sad and exceedingly unhappy. But it would be all over; the tie of sympathy would be too strong; he would have made himself too necessary to her. One day she would have to yield, and find her life's happiness in thus yielding.

Charlie's white lily was too fair to be left to wither alone, and I knew Harcourt's Manners would be worthy to win the prize. I could see it all before it happened, while Lesbia talked in her serious way of Mr. Manners's unselfishness. Presently, however, she changed the subject, and began questioning me eagerly about my work; and just then Jill joined us, and placed herself on the floor at my feet, with the firm intention, evidently, of listening to our remarks.

The conversation drifted round to Gladwyn presently. I could see Lesbia was a little discontented with the friends of mine that I had mentioned casually in my letters. "I can't quite make out the relationship," she said, in a puzzled tone. "You are always talking about this Gladys. Is she really so beautiful and fascinating? And who is Miss Darrell?"

"You had better ask me," interrupted Jill, quite rudely, "for Ursula is so absurdly infatuated about the whole family; she thinks them all quite perfect, with the exception of the double-faced lady, Miss Darrell; but they are very ordinary,—quite ordinary people, I assure you."

"Now, Jill, we do not want any of your impertinence. Lesbia would rather hear my description of my friends."

"On the contrary, she would prefer the opinion of an unprejudiced person," persisted Jill, with a noble eloquence that took away my breath. "Listen to me, Lesbia. This Mr. Hamilton that Ursula is always talking about—how I longed to box Jill's pretty little ears! she had lovely eyes, pink and shell-like, hidden under black locks—'is an ugly, disagreeable-looking man.'"

we all went into the long drawing-room, and Jill played soft snatches of Chopin, while Sara and Colonel Ferguson whispered together on the dark balcony.

Mrs. Fullerton and Lesbia joined us later on, and then Colonel Ferguson took his leave. I thought Sara looked a little quiet and subdued when she joined us; her gay chatter had died away, her eyes were a little pale, and when we had said good-night to the boys and then Aunt Philippa broke down and wept, we could hear voices from behind the door. Through the half-opened door I caught a glimpse of Sara; she was kneeling on the mother's chair, with her head on Aunt Philippa's shoulder. Was she bidding a painful regret to her old happy life? I wondered; was she looking forward with natural shrinking and a little fear to the new responsibility that awaited her on the morrow? It was the mother who was talking; one could imagine how her heart would yearn over her child to-night, what fond prayers would be uttered for the girl. Aunt Philippa was a loving mother; worldliness had not touched the ingrained warmth of her nature.

I am glad to remember how brightly the sun shone on Sara's wedding-day. There was not a cloud in the sky. When I woke, the birds were singing in Hyde Park, and Jill in her white wrapper was looking at me with bright, excited eyes.

"It is such a lovely morning!" she exclaimed, rapturously. "Actually Sara is asleep! Fancy sleeping under such circumstances! She and mother are going to have breakfast together in the school-room. Do be quick and dress. Ursula; father is always so early, you know."

Uncle Brian was reading his paper as usual when I entered the study. Miss Gillespie was pouring out coffee. Jill was tidying about the room, until her father called her to order, and then she sat down to the table. I do not think any of us enjoyed our breakfast. Uncle Brian certainly looked dull; Jill was too excited to eat; poor Miss Gillespie had tears in her eyes; she poured out tea and coffee with cold shaking hands. "Lillian Gillespie, from her devoted friend Maurice Compton," came into my head; no wonder the thought of marriage-bells and bridal snare made her sad. I am afraid I should have said myself up in my own room, and refused to mingle with the crowd, under these circumstances. I quite understood the feeling of sympathy that made Jill stoop down and kiss the smooth brown hair as she passed the governess's chair; it was a sort of affectionate homage to misfortune patiently borne.

I went up to the school-room when breakfast was over. Aunt Philippa looked as though she had not slept: there was a jaundiced look about her eyes. Sara, on the contrary, looked fresh and smiling; she was just going to put herself in her maid's hands; but she tripped back in her pretty muslin dressing-gown and rose-colored ribbons to kiss me and ask me to look after Jill's toilet.

"Every one is so busy, and mother and Draper will be attending to me. Do please, Ursie dear, see that she puts on her bonnet straight?" And of course I promised to do my best.

As I happened, Jill was very tractable and obedient. I think her beautiful bridesmaid's dress rather impressed her. I saw a look of awe in her eyes as she regarded herself, and then she dropped a mocking courtesy to her own image.

"I am Jocelyn to-day, remember that, Ursula. I don't look a bit like Jill. Jocelyn Adelaide Garston, bridesmaid."

and sisters shed tears; a sense of loss pervades the house; the bridal frenzy is kept up in the empty room; one little glove is in the table, another has fallen to the floor. All sorts of girlish trinkets that have been forgotten lie unheeded in corners.

I know we all thought that evening would never end, and I quite understood why Jill hovered near her mother's chair, listening to her conversation with Mrs. Fullerton. Every shed a few bright tears. I heard her mention Ralph's name once. "Poor boy! how proud Brian had been of him!" Uncle Brian's son's name, she said, "I will not call it my mother's name, and Jill shook her mother's hand, and said, quite naturally, 'Most likely Ralph knows all about it, mamma; and of course he is glad that Sara is so happy.'"

Our pretty light-hearted Sara. I had no idea that I should miss her so much! Indeed, we all missed her; it seemed to me now that I had undervalued her. True, she had not been a congenial companion to me in my dark days; but even then I had loved her. Why should I have expected her to grope among the shadows with me, instead of following her into the sunshine? Sara could not act contrary to her nature. Sad things depressed her. She wanted to cease every one to be happy.

Her feelings were far deeper than I had imagined them to be. I liked the way she spoke to Jill when she was bidding good-by to us all.

"Jocelyn dear, promise me that you will be kind to mother. She has no one but you now to study her little ways and make her comfortable, and she is not as young as she was, and things like that." Of course Jill promised, with tears in her eyes, and Sara went away smiling and radiant. Jill was already trying to get down her promise, as she hovered like a tall slim shadow behind her mother's chair in the twilight.

"Come and sit down, Jocelyn, my dear," observed Aunt Philippa at last, in her motherly voice. When I looked again, Jill's black locks were bobbing in her mother's lap, and the three seemed all talking together.

There was very little rest for any one during the next few days. Sara's marriage had brought sundry relations from all the country homes up to town, and there was open house kept for all. Jill went sight-seeing with the young people. Aunt Philippa drove some of the elder ladies to the Academy, to the Grosvener Gallery, to the Park, and other places.

Every day there were luncheon-parties, tea-parties, dinner-parties; the long drawing-room seemed full every evening. Jill sat on one or other of her pretty new gowns, and played her pieces industriously; there was no stealing away in corners now. There were round games for the young people; now and then they went to the theatre or opera; no wonder Jill was too tired and excited to open her lesson-books. My fortnight's visit extended itself to three weeks. Aunt Philippa could not spare me; she said I was much too useful to her and Uncle Brian. I wrote to Mrs. Barton and told her of it, and she begged the latter to inform her brother that I could not leave my relations just yet.

Lady Betty wrote back at once. She had given my message, she said, but Giles had not seemed half pleased with it. She thought he was going away somewhere, she did not know where; but he had told her to say that there were no fresh cases, and that Robert Lambert was going on all right, and that as I seemed enjoying myself so much it was a pity not to take a longer holiday while I was about it, and she sent him kind regards; and that was all. I suppose I ought to have been satisfied, but it struck me that there was a flavor of sarcasm about Mr. Hamilton's message.

But he was right; I was enjoying myself. Lesbia was still in town, and I saw her every day. My acquaintance with Miss Gillespie grew to intimacy, and I think we mutually enjoyed each other's society. Aunt Philippa seemed to turn to me naturally for help and comfort, and her constant "Ursula, my dear, will you do this for me?" gave me a real feeling of pleasure; and then there was Jill to pet and praise at every odd moment.