

A BUNCH OF VIOLETS.

(Continued.)

"I'm not going to let Digges hear me; besides, he's as deaf as Aunt Rosa."

"Is not that the lady whose eyes have made their appearance again in you, Allie, after lying dormant in the family for a hundred years or so?"

"I believe so. And I have heard that she was the most pig-headed woman of the age in which she lived."

"Her eyes are exactly the color of yours, Allie—the same shade of blue gray, like an autumn fog."

"It does not sound well," I laugh, shrugging my shoulders. "Foggy eyes don't give one the idea of anything very alluring. (Olive, you don't mean to say you can't eat any more strawberries?)"

"I am reduced to that deplorable plight, my dear."

Looking at the table, with its delicate appointments of glass and silver, its dainty flowers, the cake and cream and piled-up dishes of strawberries, my heart aches, thinking of my boy. He may be hungry, while there is food and to spare in my house, while my very servants feed on the fat of the land. The thought sends that old dull aching pain through my heart again.

"I shall go down and see what they have done to the room they are to dance in," Olive says, getting up from the table. "I hear the decorations there are to be something splendid—all scarlet geraniums, festooned about the mottoes and flags."

"So I hear."

"Allie, I should like exceedingly to shake you!"

"Before all my respectable ancestors, Olive?"

"Before them all. Oh, Allie, I forgot to remind you of that note to the confectioner! We left it lying on the study mantel-piece."

"It will be late for post then, unless I run back now and ask Uncle Tod to take charge of it."

"Shall I go?" Olive asks readily.

"Certainly not. If any one must go, I will go myself."

"But can't you send somebody over for it?"

"They would not find it probably. I have nothing particular to do just at present; so, if you like to run down and see what they are doing in the servant's hall, I'll go back to the vicarage and give my note to Uncle Tod."

Olive agrees to this arrangement; and, five minutes later I am in my wood again, passing under its mazy network of sun and shadow, drinking in the delicious woodland air.

I walk very slowly, the little noisy brown river below me on my right hand, on my left the overhanging rocks with their June vesture of moss and ferns and trailing festoons of bindweed and honey-suckle, and, while I walk, I am thinking of Gerard Baxter and of the dream that I have been dreaming for the last three months. Has he forgotten me? This is the question which troubles me most. If he had forgotten me, would he not have found means to tell me so? Had he not promised to tell me, in the gloomy old drawing-room in Carleton Street—were they they not the very last words he had said to me before he said good-by? He has not forgotten me, for, if he had, he would have told me—so I repeat to myself forlornly; and, while the thought is in my heart, I raise my eyes and see him standing before me, thin and gaunt and shabby, in the soft sunlight and shadow of my woodland path.

"Gerard!" I cry; and yet the reality of his presence scarcely startles me, so present had he been to my thoughts.

He answers nothing, not a single word, only stands there, looking at me as if I were a ghost. But it is he who looks like the ghost of his former self.

"Gerard, where have you come from? What are you doing here?"

"I have come from London," he answers, without any gladness in his face—"from London, to see you."

Something in his manner chills me, and sends the warm blood surging back to my heart.

"You have come to tell me that you have forgotten me?"

"No," he replies, a dusky red coming into his haggard cheeks, "I shall never come to tell you that."

I am conscious of a feeling of relief. I had scarcely doubted him, and yet his manner had seemed like the grasp of an iron hand about my heart. But, if he has not forgotten me, it matters very little about anything else.

"You promised to let me know," I say, standing before him in the dancing sunlight and shadow, looking with wistful eyes into his altered face.

"I have not forgotten you," he repeats, almost savagely, a fierce light in his eyes. "I wish I had!"

"You wish you had, Gerard?"

"I do, before Heaven!"

"But, I care for nothing, so long as you have not forgotten me. After all, what does anything matter, if we love each other?"

"If we love each other!" he repeats vaguely, his hungry, hollow eyes devouring my face.

"If you love me, Gerard, I can forgive everything else."

"I tried hard," he says brokenly, turning his face away—"I tried hard to be worthy of you, Allie."

"I know you did," I answer tenderly. "I know all about it, Gerard—I have heard."

"But it was not in me. It was a bad day for you when you cared for me—if you ever did care."

"I did care," I respond gravely, holding my head as high as his is low. "I did care for you, and I care for you still!"

"I hope not!" he exclaims quickly and passionately, stretching out his hands as if to keep my words away. "I am not worthy of you—you must not waste another thought on such a miserable degraded wretch as I am!"

"But if I love you, Gerard?"

"But you do not know how low I have fallen, child!"

"Not so low but that I can reach to lift you up, with Heaven's help," I say, in the same grave tender way. "Do not thrust me away, Gerard. I should not be a woman if I turned from you because you were unfortunate—if you had been fortunate I might not have cared for you half so much."

"You are an angel!" he returns brokenly; but his head is turned away from me. He makes no movement to cross the yard or two of mossy path, the glint of sunshine and flicker of dancing shadow, which divides us from each other.

"You have suffered since I saw you last," I say, with a pitiful glance at his gaunt hollow cheeks and faded eyes.

"Suffered!" he echoes, with an indescribable intonation. "Allie, if you cared for me—as you say you did—why didn't you marry me?"

"And add a new burden to what was heavy enough already, Gerard?"

"Were you afraid of poverty? What matter if we had starved together? But we should not have starved—you would have given me courage to succeed. And if we had starved one day, we should have feasted the next—we should have been like two children—we should have cried and laughed together! We should have been happy, Allie, because we should have loved each other; but we have missed it—lost it forever!"

He speaks rapidly—fiercely, but quite coherently. If it had not been for his coherence I should have thought that he was mad, or had been drinking too much wine. But I do not like his look, or the desperate light in his eyes.

"I was cruel," I say, stretching out my hand to him. "There are plenty of people who would say that I had acted wisely: but I know in my heart that I did not. I ought to have married you, or forbidden you to think of me at all."

He looks at me with those haggard hungry eyes—looks at my face, my dress; but he makes no movement to take my outstretched hand. "You look like a picture, Allie. I wish I could paint you in that white gown, with all those tangled leaves for background, your head thrown out so delicately against that patch of pale blue sky. You look so fair and sweet and good. What right had I to drag you down to share .. life of struggle and poverty with me!"

"If I loved you, I ought to have been glad to share it. I ought not to have left you alone to battle with poverty and temptation. That was the cruel, selfish mistake I made—that is what makes me blame myself now a thousand times more than I blame you."

He does not know how I might have raised him up—how high above all want I might have placed him—how little we might have struggled with the world which has treated him so badly.

"And yet, if I loved you as I ought," he says wistfully, "I ought to be glad to see you here—happy among all bright and lovely things. I wonder," he adds, with a short cold laugh, "that you even condescend to speak to a poor shabby out-at-elbows wretch like me?"

"Do you wonder?" I answer a little coldly. "You seem to have but a poor opinion of me, Mr. Baxter."

"I was so sure you had forgotten me. 'You had seemed to care for me so little always—it was I who had cared for you. I said to myself, 'She will despise me—she will not believe in me any more.' And that made me reckless—I did not care what became of me—I do not care now!"

"But I care."

"Do you?" he asks a little curiously, looking down in my face.

"How often must I tell you I love you, Gerard?"

"But you must hate me, Allie, from this day forward."

"Did you come here to tell me this?"

"I came here because I felt that I must see you again. Do you know that it is nearly three months since I saw your face?"

How well I know it! But I only ask gravely and coldly—

"How did you find me out?"

"I knew you lived here with your uncle. You told me he was the clergyman of this place."

"Where are you staying? At Yattendon?"

"At the inn there. I came down to make some sketches in the neighborhood," he adds, smiling—a very faint tired haggard smile. "There are some pretty bits about here—at Woodhay—so they tell me. But I suppose I could not venture to carry my paints and easel in here without the owner's leave!"

"I can get that for you very easily."

"I suppose you know the people who live here?"

"I know every one in the neighborhood."

"The sketches are not of much moment—it was to see you that I came. I had something to tell you—something I must say to you—"

"And I," I interrupt, with a happy thrill at my heart—"I have something to say to you, Gerard. But I have a fancy for saying it to-morrow—you will know why afterward. If you come here to-morrow, I will tell you a secret."

"My news will keep till to-morrow," he says, with the kind of eagerness with which a drowning man will catch at a straw; "and it will be something to live for, to think that I shall see you again."

"If you come to Woodhay to-morrow, you will see a village fête."

"I am in no trim for fêtes," he answers, bitterly, with a glance at his threadbare sleeve.

"Oh, there will be all kinds of people here to-morrow!"

"Even beggars like me! Is it a school feast, or what?"