

BEAUTY'S DAUGHTERS.

(By the Author of "Phyllis," "Molly Bawn," "Airy Fairy Lilian," etc.)

CHAPTER III.

"Where are you going, mamma?" asks Gretchen, entering her mother's chamber, with a delicious little pink-rose flush upon her cheeks, born of her swift run through the scented garden. Kitty by this time, having safely incarcerated Flora in her dressing-room, has also joined her mother.

"To see poor Kenneth Dugdale," returns Mrs. Tremaine. "I actually never heard of his arrival until this afternoon. And it appears he has been in the country now a week. Such a very long time to be in ignorance; but your father is always most careless. He must have known of it, and I suppose forgot as usual."

"Perhaps he didn't hear of it," says Gretchen.

"Well, at all events the visit cannot be put off any longer; and of course I shall go myself. His mother was my dearest friend. You may as well come with me, Gretchen, as Kitty is so busy. Poor fellow! it is such a sad case. Quite the saddest I know. It makes me positively wretched even to think of it. Thank you, dear; yes, you may ring the bell. I think I will take a glass of sherry before I start."

"You mean Maudie Dugdale's brother?" asks Gretchen,—"the poor man who broke his back out hunting, or dislocated his spine, or did something horrible? You and Kitty, I remember, used to tell me of him last year."

"The doctors now say he will be an invalid all his life. Can't stir off his sofa, I've been told."

"I think I can recollect him years ago," says Gretchen, musingly. "He was down here, was he not?—a tall, fair boy of about fifteen. Old Mr. Dugdale, his uncle, was so fond and proud of him. Both he, and Maudie before she left for India, never seemed to tire when telling me of him."

"There was a sincere attachment on both sides, I believe. He never would come here since his uncle's death, although that event made Laxton Hall his own. It seems sad that he should come here now for the first time, as master, only to die."

"He may not die for years," says Mrs. Tremaine, who is vainly struggling with a refractory bracelet. "That old man in town with the one large tooth—that wonderful surgeon, you know, Sir—Sir—what was his name, Kitty?—said he might live for a long time. (I wonder they can't make proper clasps nowadays! Thank you, dear.) But poor Kenneth was so wilful, gave himself up at once, and, because one doctor spoke unfavorably of his case, could hardly be persuaded to see another. Old Sir—Sir—told me all about it. What was his name, Kitty?"

"Sir Henry Pilaster."

"Of course; of course. Plaister they call him in town,—so rude of them. He told me the poor boy was greatly changed."

"He must be," says Kitty. "I met him wherever I went the season before last, and thought him the gayest fellow possible. He was a general favorite all round, it seemed to me; and now, we hear, he is silent, morbid, melancholy."

"Who can wonder at it?" exclaims Gretchen, with deep compassion. "To go in one moment from a state of perfect health to what must be only a living death,—the worst in that it is living,—the very thought is depressing: what must the reality be! If such a thing were to happen to me I think I should just turn my face to the wall and cry and cry until I died."

"Oh, no, you wouldn't," says Kitty, with a little laugh, patting her cheek softly; "I know you better than that. At first you would sigh a little and repine in secret; and then one day you would take yourself to task, and say to yourself, 'After all, are there not others more unhappy than I am?' And then you would begin to think how you could lighten the cares of other people."

"You are describing an angel," says Gretchen, with a faint blush, and a suspicion of reproach in her tone.

"My dearest Gretchen," breaks in Mrs. Tremaine at this moment, "do run away and put on your things. It is quite half-past three, and you know how your father hates to have the horses kept waiting." As a rule, Mrs. Tremaine alludes to her husband as though he belonged to the girls alone, as though he was their exclusive property and they alone were responsible for his eccentricities. "Now, don't be five minutes, darling, or I shall be really vexed," she says, mildly, her thoughts intent upon her card-case, which is nowhere to be found.

* * * * *

Above in the heavens—

"Apollo, Delius, or of older use
All-seeing Hyperion—what you will—
Has mounted."

All the air is hot and heavy with the strength and fierceness of his glory.

As the carriage rolls along the dusty road, bearing Gretchen and her mother to Laxton Hall, the horses fling up their heads impatiently, as though in eager search of the cool wind that comes not, and throw upwards little flecks of foam, that, lighting upon their backs, gleam like snow-flakes against their glossy skins.

The day is merry with the voices of many birds that send their sweet hymns of praise from wood and thicket. There is no less harmonious sound to mar their melody. A sense of peace and warmth has lulled the world into a mid-day sleep.

Below in the bay the ocean, vast, illimitable, has also sunk to rest. Not a breath, not a murmur, comes to disturb the serenity of its repose. Only from out the great gray rocks, that seem ever to keep eternal watch, dash the sea-birds wildly from their hidden nests in search of watery prey. Their snowy wings expanded glint and glisten beneath the sun's hot rays like silver lightning as they hover above the great deep and then drop into its bosom to disappear only to rise again.

Far away upon the horizon the sea and the sky have met and melted into each other's embrace. All is one soft ethereal mass of palest blue: in vain to seek the termination of one, the beginning of the other. The heaven itself is

a continued sea, where tiny cloudlets, yellow-tinged, stand out as isles, and placid lakes and quiet shores are numerous.

By this time Gretchen and her mother have reached the gates of Laxton, have entered, and are driving swiftly down the long dark avenue. Having never seen it since the old man's death, Gretchen now turns her head admiringly from side to side, as though to recall to mind the pretty spots once loved.

On one side can be seen a small but perfect lake, on which swans float gracefully in and out between the broad green leaves of the water-lilies that are hardly so fair as their own breasts. On the other side stretches a vast expanse of park and upland, swelling, waving,—one grand mass of living foliage, tender greens and tawny browns and russet reds, while through them here and there, like a faint streak of moonlight, comes a suspicion of the distant ocean.

"What a perfect place it is!" says Gretchen, dreamily, yet with a certain amount of honest enthusiasm.

"Quite so," says Mrs. Tremaine, briskly, who never dreams, "and just fifteen thousand pounds a year. Really, it is most unfortunate about that poor young man. By the by, I quite forget who the next heir will be."

"If he was very nice I shouldn't mind marrying him," says Gretchen, idly, with a little lazy laugh. "Oh, see, mother, that exquisite touch of light upon the hill beyond—how beautiful! It sounds wicked, but do you know I am rather glad this Mr. Dugdale cannot go about much? New people have such a horrid trick of altering things, and cutting down trees, and generally behaving very badly. If he is as apathetic as you say, I dare say he will let well alone."

"I dare say," says Mrs. Tremaine. "I should rather think George Dugdale's son would inherit. A most unpleasant man, and a very distant cousin; but no doubt the younger branches are better mannered."

Then the carriage sweeps round a softened angle and draws up before the hall-door. It is opened, and a very gorgeous personage in irreproachable garments comes down the steps and tells Mr. Tremaine that Mr. Dugdale is pretty well, and down-stairs, but that he is not in the habit of receiving visitors.

As he draws towards the close of this little speech, Mrs. Tremaine—who, to judge by her expression, must be utterly unaware that any one has been speaking—takes out a card, scribbles on it a word or two, and gives it to one of her men, who gives it to the other man, who gives it to somebody else inside the hall, who vanishes.

Then ensues a pause that might be a silent one but for the faint little laugh that breaks from Gretchen.

"What is it?" asks her mother, rousing herself from an apparent reverie.

"Very little, dear, almost nothing. I was merely wondering how you would look if this very difficult young gentleman sends you word he will not see you."

"That is impossible," replies Mrs. Tremaine, calmly. "No young gentleman ever sent me such a message. He will, of course, be very pleased to see me."

She is right. He will be very pleased to see her. The gorgeous personage returns presently with a few words to that effect; whereupon Mrs. Tremaine descends from her carriage, and Gretchen follows her, and they rustle through halls and corridors, across a library, and past a heavy *portière*, into a small room beyond, where lies the hero of the hour.

It is a charming room, not large, but comfort itself. Everything is pale, or faintly tinted; there is scarcely a pronounced colour anywhere, unless, perhaps, in the huge bowls of sweetly-smelling flowers that lie about in graceful disorder on all the tables. Against the walls and on the brackets quaint pieces of china frown, and simper, and curtsy, and make hideous grimaces. Upon the cabinets, and in them, old English punch-bowls push themselves officiously before the notice of dainty Chelsea maidens, and cups innocent of handles stand in rows.

Wedgwood jugs, and Worcester plates, and little bits of rarest Sèvres shine conspicuously everywhere. There are eight or nine fine pictures,—some by modern artists,—and a good deal of handsome carving.

The whole place seems full of sunshine as through the open windows the soft breezes creep shyly in and out. It was Maud Dugdale's room in the old man's life, before she married and went to India, and even yet the charm of her presence seems to haunt it.

The windows, made in casement fashion, are thrown wide, so that the ivy and the struggling roses that cover the walls outside are peeping in, forming a bower picturesque and perfumed.

The fond little sunbeams, too, lest they should be forgotten, have stolen in, and are flecking all they touch with gold. Across the grass comes a tender murmuring as of doves from the wood beyond. It is one of those calm, sleepy days when "all the air a solemn stillness holds" and a sense of peace makes itself felt. The "tender grace" of the hour, the careless artistic beauty of the room and all its surroundings, touch Gretchen, though vaguely, and then her eyes wander to the couch close to the window, upon which a young man lies full length.

As her glance meets his, a great and sudden pity fills her heart. He is a very tall young man, and, though somewhat slight, is finely formed. He is fair, with that rich nut-brown hair through which soft threads of gold run generously; his face is not so much handsome as very beautiful. His eyes are large and of an intense blue,—eyes that before misfortune clouded them were friends to laughter, but are now sad with unutterable melancholy.

His mouth beneath his light moustache is tender and mobile, but firm. Originally there must have been a certain amount of happy recklessness about the whole face that fascinated and contrasted pleasantly with its great gentleness. But the happiness and gayety and laughter have all disappeared, leaving only regret and passionate protest in their place, and something that is almost despair in the blue eyes.

He flushes painfully as Mrs. Tremaine enters the room, and, closing his left hand with some nervous force upon the arm of the couch, makes the customary effort to rise. It is only a momentary effort. Almost on the instant he remembers and sinks back again passive. But the remembrance and the futile attempt are indescribably bitter.

"Dear Kenneth, I knew you would see me," says Mrs. Tremaine, quickly,