

Family Circle.

PARADISE CORNER.

He was a young man, happy, careless, and rich; she a girl of nineteen, whom the fates had made the reverse of all this; and each, bent on a widely different errand, was going swiftly round a London square one November afternoon just as gloom was creeping over the great city.

Gerald Oakley quickened his steps for a trifling fancy; he wished to take tickets for a theatre, and to secure the best places he could. Delphine Marston hastened her pace for the sake of reaching a fashionable West-end house of business at the earliest possible moment, hoping to receive the money due for a beautiful piece of art embroidery she had done to order.

It had been raining, and pools of water, which were half mud, stood in the street. Mr. Oakley thought nothing of these, however; all his effort was concentrated just then on obtaining two stalls in a good position for viewing the play; whilst Miss Marston's hurried steps were moved by the remembrance of an invalid mother and an empty purse.

Yes, empty! Two small silver coins—threepenny-bits—were all that remained to her till the lovely border she had been embroidering was paid for. Swiftly each pursued his way and hers; and the result of their absorption in thought and of the flickering shadow cast by the street-lamp, added to the gathering gloom, was that they came into momentary collision at the corner of the square.

It would not have mattered, perhaps, for Gerald threw himself against the railing in order to break the blow of the young lady, but that the accident withheld the precious packet containing the art embroidery right into the midst of a pool of water glistening under the lamp-post.

"Are you hurt? Pray pardon my carelessness. What can I do to repair it?" exclaimed the young man, hurriedly, deeply distressed at being the occasion of the accident.

But poor, lovely Delphine was far more distressed than he was, and her beautiful eyes strained a wild glance at the brown paper covering in which her work was enveloped. An instant was sufficient to tell her that one corner had been soaked in the pool just enough to make her employers regret it just enough to bring misery, almost ruin, to the poor girl.

She uttered an agonizing cry, and burst into tears despite her efforts to the contrary.

"What is it?" repeated the young man, now in real consternation. "Have I spoiled your parcel by my unpardonable haste? Let me do anything I can do to repair my fault."

For Gerald Oakley was as good-hearted a young fellow as ever breathed, and he half-divined the real state of the case when he perceived the trouble into which this young girl was thrown by observing the damaged paper which contained, doubtless, something valuable.

Necessity and despair are two masters who do not admit of much fencing as to the truth; and Delphine, thinking of her mother so helpless and entirely left to her care, faltered out:

"It is some art embroidery which is spoiled by the wet. I was taking it to the shop I work for. Oh, sir, you ask what you can do. Will you buy this embroidery at a very reduced price? It could form the border for a chimney-piece or for a table-cover."

"Certainly I will buy it; in fact, my sister wants two or three borders like this. Let us take them of you instead of going elsewhere. Of course I will buy this one now, but at the full price, not at a reduced one. Let me ask your address, and I will send a messenger to-night, that is if I have not enough money with me to pay for it."

Delphine looked up and thanked him heartily. "My mother and I lodge two or three streets from this," she said. And then she named the modest sum of two pounds for her embroidery, which was very beautiful.

"Allow me to give it to you now," said Gerald, removing his hat, and regarding with growing interest this lovely, penniless, friendless girl, who looked like a lady, and who was earning her bread in this precarious way.

"I must learn her address. My sister Connie might help her," ran swiftly through his brain. Aloud he courteously explained that his sister would be happy to call at the lodgings and give her some orders, upon which Delphine's sweet voice named the street and the house in which she lived, after which he and she went their different ways.

But young Oakley no longer thought of securing his stalls for the theatre, that could be done presently, for the vision of the girl who had just quitted him entirely filled his mind.

"So young, so beautiful, and to have to earn her own living like that! To suffer such agony for fear of the loss of two pounds! What should I feel if Connie was in such a strait? Oh, we must try and help her!" thought he.

Then he stood under a lamp-post reflecting, and finally walked off in the direction of the address given him.

Ten minutes took him to the house where Delphine lodged, and a second sufficed to show him that she and her mother were domiciled at a baker's. He entered the shop, bought something he did not want, and then made an inquiry:

"He had promised to ask for his sister" (he was inventive you see, reader) "if two ladies, Mrs. and Miss Marston, lived there?"

"Oh yes, sir," answered the tidy shopwoman, "and very nice ladies they are, too, only so poor

now that the young lady has lost her Italian lessons, which used to bring her in something regular."

"What! she teaches Italian?" asked Gerald, becoming more and more eager to find out all he could concerning the girl whom he had just encountered.

"Yes, see Mrs. Marston is an Italian lady. That's how it is her daughter knows the language so perfect, sir," replied the woman who was behind the counter.

"But why did Miss Marston lose her pupils, then?" asked Gerald.

"They went abroad, sir; an 'tisn't everyone as wants to learn Italian. I do wish she could get some more lessons, that 'ud set them up again."

"Why, I know a lady who would give anything to find a good Italian teacher!" exclaimed he, again inventing, and relying on his sister Connie's falling in with his charitable designs: "indeed," continued he, "I want to take a few lessons myself before I go to Italy next spring."

"Best take them now, sir," returned the shopwoman, smiling. "Them foreign tongues isn't learnt in a day. November 'ull soon slip away, and spring comes after winter."

The young man smiled, saying aloud: "That's very true, so I and my sister will call to-morrow."

To himself he repeated the poet Shelley's exquisite lines, containing so much meaning:

"Oh! wind, when 'he winter comes, Can the spring be far behind?"

"Will it be so for this young girl? Can I and Connie together lift her out of her bitter winter into spring?" thought he, as he thanked the woman, gave her his card, and uttered a courteous good night.

"Well, that's as pleasant a looking gentleman as ever came into our shop!" said she to herself, looking after him. "I'll take up the card this moment. Maybe it'll cheer that pretty Miss Delphine, and put a few roses into her cheeks."

"Here, miss," called she, knocking at the door. "I do think I've brought you a bit of good fortune, for I believe just through my chatter I've got you some Italian lessons. A gentleman and a lady are going to call about it to-morrow, and here's his card."

Delphine, and indeed her mother, were quite excited at this news. It seemed to promise greater freedom from the anxiety which was killing them both.

"Mr. Gerald Oakley," murmured Delphine, reading the card, but in nowise connecting this name with that of the stranger who had been so ready to help her that evening. He had spoken of ordering embroidery; he did not know that she gave lessons in Italian.

And thus it came to pass that she was taken quite by surprise when the next day, towards noon, a young lady walked in, followed by the gentleman whose acquaintance she had made last night in so unusual a manner.

Connie Oakley, who generally aided her brother in all his plans and schemes, was fascinated by the sight of Delphine. The girl was so graceful, and added all the charms of Italian beauty to the refinement of English loveliness.

"Gerald must not come here too often! He will be falling in love with her!" thought Connie. And we need not blame her for desiring to spare her only brother from the difficulties which attend a *mistake of the heart*.

However, she resolved to go cordially through this interview, and then to tell her brother plainly, as they walked home together, that he must avoid all appearance of scandal for the young lady's sake, and leave her to call, whenever it was necessary, on the Marstons.

But how our good designs and wise plans may be upset in a moment! Even whilst Connie Oakley was settling this prudent line of acting in her own mind, her brother overruled it in an instant.

"Connie," said he, "Miss Marston can give you and me Italian lessons together. I had decided to take some, and to work hard before I go out to tour about Italy in the spring. It is so stupid not to be able to speak to the peasants; one loses half the enjoyment."

Poor Connie! she had already said how delighted she should be to improve her Italian; but she was in nowise delighted to do so at the cost of her dearly-loved brother losing his heart to this stranger who earned her living by dint of hard work, and who lived over a baker's shop.

"Well, we can settle that later on," stammered she, unable entirely to conceal her distaste to Gerald's plan. But Gerald, intent on ingratiating himself with Delphine and her mother, and in discovering in what other way he could be of service to them, did not perceive his sister's coldness to his suggestion.

"There are the Smithsons, Connie," said he; "I know that Margaret Smithson began Italian last year, and gave it up because her governess went back to Italy."

"You are very, very kind," said Delphine, gratefully, quick to perceive how anxious he was to help them.

It was his sister who shortened the interview, and who read him a short homily on prudence as they returned home.

"You know, dear Gerald, you must not take these lessons. It will not be quite the thing. Nor must you go to Mrs. Marston's lodgings."

"Why not?" cried he, surprised, though at the same instant an answer flashed into his brain.

"Young gentlemen cannot ask beautiful young ladies to be their instructors," said Connie. "If not for your sake, Gerald, be wise for hers. Suppose she fell in love with you?"

Gerald whistled, coloured, and promised to relinquish the Italian lessons.

"Though merely out of deference to you my sage sister. For that and that alone. I am not such a vain fellow as to dream that this lovely Miss Marston will break her heart for my sake whilst I should be murmuring her soft mother tongue. No matter; have your wish! Good-bye to the Italian lessons; only manage to make it up to her in some other manner."

"Good, dear boy!" exclaimed Connie. "That I will do you may be sure."

With an easy heart she made all arrangements for the lessons, and (incited by her brother) ordered three borders for chimney-pieces. Delphine had abundance of work now; but as she sat at her embroidery she thought how much she should like to see Mr. Oakley sometime. He had said he too would take lessons, but he never appeared.

And Gerald? He also longed to see again that lovely, incomparable young creature who had so moved his interest and pity; but how could he break his word to Connie? No; he would not do that, but he had more than once strolled at dusk down the street in which Delphine was located, and on two occasions fortune had favored him so far that he had obtained a distinct view of her—once as she entered the baker's shop, and at another time as she passed out.

How he wished to go forward! to exchange a word with her! He dwelt continually on her image, and that which his sister dreaded had come to pass. Love had blossomed in his soul for the penniless Delphine. One evening, when December's snows were falling, he sat late in his own room, dreaming of his future. The young man was restless and ill at ease, knowing that it would give great pain to his family if he asked the hand of this friendless girl, of whose antecedents he knew nothing. Ought he not to think something of his mother—of Connie? And might not happiness fly away when the irrevocable step was taken; but more and more he thought that he would take that step, confess all to Connie, fall on his knees before Delphine, and whisper to her that he had loved her ever since he and she met in the gloomy London street.

Midnight sounded! This night was a sort of era in his life; for the cousin from whom he had inherited his wealth, and who had died five years ago, had left with his bequest a letter, enjoining his heir to open it after the lapse of five years, on the anniversary of the testator's death, at midnight, when in complete solitude.

The hour and the time had arrived to-night: the secret he was to learn would soon be in his possession. The life of his relative, now dead and gone, had been a fair and open career, full of kindnesses and courtesies. It could not, then, be a dreadful deed he was to learn from the hand now inactive for ever. Nevertheless, the young man opened the envelope with a certain thrill of emotion.

"Po'r Horace!" murmured he, "I wonder if I am to learn a love secret? He never married."

His eyes were soon fastened on the page; his cheeks flushed, his brow knit.

What was this he saw before him?

"I wish to let some time pass before you read this, for time softens us and gives future possibilities. Besides, you are so impetuous, you might refuse to take my bequest unless you had opportunity first for reflection and for seeing that you are the person who ought to administer it when I am dead and gone."

"Then there is a secret!" broke from Gerald's lips when he had read thus far.

Yes, there was, indeed. And as he read on he learned that once—when boyhood trenched on manhood—at an hour when sorely, cruelly tried, his dead cousin had yielded to temptation, and had used the sum of twenty pounds belonging to his employer, and entrusted to another, a sum he knew he could replace within a week. This employer was then absent; it was the most unlikely thing in the world that the fraud would be discovered.

But the unlikely thing occurred. His employer came home three days before he was expected. Gerald's cousin was absent for a few hours—accounts were called for the twenty pounds were missing. In vain the young man to whom the money had been entrusted insisted on his innocence—declared that he had placed the money safely in his desk—though he had certainly neglected to lock it immediately. His dishonesty was proved in his employer's mind, and the real culprit found, on his return, that his friend had been dismissed, and had disappeared. Even now, however, he believed, he hoped, that he could remedy the disaster. To confess his crime would be destruction for this he had not courage—but he would (so he thought) repair his fault. He would find his friend; he would pretend that he had found the money in the desk, in a hidden recess together they would tell their story to the offended gentleman, and gain reinstatement for his friend! He could not do more for the sake of those for whom he had sinned—but oh! it should be a life-long lesson for the future.

But never—never did his friend return. All advertisements, all efforts to trace him were fruitless. The twenty pounds were restored the corner in the desk shown—the employer convinced that he had been hasty, but this did not bring back the injured youth.

Years went by, and the one who had injured him rose by rapid degrees to prosperity; but, all unknown to others, he carried a canker in his heart, for never never had he other opportunity of making reparation. And as he lay dying he penned this confession on to his young cousin, enjoining him to pay a sum of six thousand pounds, if he should ever have the opportunity, to any child or grandchild of Wilfred Marston.