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KATE ASHWOOD.

CHAPTER X.

"Love's heralds should be thoughts, Which ten times faster glide than the sunbeams, Driving back shadows over louring hills; Therefore do nimble-pinioned doves draw love, And therefore hath the wind-swift Cupid wings." Romeo and Juliet.

Aunt Sarah in her frequent visits to Warrenstown perceived how truly unhappy Kate was, so she proposed that her niece should spend some time at the Hermitage. There was always a cheerful welcome for every one in that hospitable mansion.

The Hermitage was a large rambling house with rooms innumerable. On entering the hall, the first thing that struck the visitor was a large glass case of stuffed birds that occupied one side of the hall; farther on came a second vestibule in which were cases of antiquities, curious shells, and minerals. The conchologist and mineralogist would revel in the enjoyment of these treasures, there were coins of different countries and nations; curious old manuscripts; in fact, a miniature museum.

Aunt Sarah and her sister Jane cared little for fashion; their dresses were of the simplest make; they used to spend their entire time between works of charity and kindness, and the enjoyment of literature and scientific pursuits. And now for their brothers. Uncle John and Charles were curious old men, nearly as well fitted for the Museum as the mummies often exhibited. Uncle Charles in particular had a yellow shrivelled up skin; his manner was formal though kind, and he always persisted in calling Miss Primrose 'Miss Sarah Primrose,' and his youngest sister, 'Miss Jane.' He had an abhorrence of any thing that disturbed his daily routine of life; such not only ruffled his equanimity sadly, but in reality disagreed with his health. Every one that liked was welcome to stay in his house as long as they pleased; but not to ask him to hasten or postpone his dinner-hour one moment; or to rise or go to bed one instant before or after the proper time. He was becoming very debilitated, and had an inveterate habit of baking his handkerchief, as his nurses called the operation. This consisted in flattening it in one hand, patting it down, and then transferring it to the other.

He was always to be seen in the daytime in a suit of shepherd's plaid and a wide awake-hat. This, however, was changed at dinner-time for black cloth coat, waistcoat, and trousers, and an immaculate white neckcloth of alarming size. He had for years always occupied the foot of his table, while Miss Primrose took the seat of honor at the head; and these customs never altered. No machinery went with greater exactitude and regularity than did the household mechanism of the Hermitage.

Kate now entered into many of her aunt's pursuits, worked for the poor, visited them, things that never were thought of at Warrenstown—and varied her occupations by walks, in which the study of botany and natural history formed the object of attraction.

Nothing was ever disturbed at the Hermitage; and the brothers winced always should any one heedlessly disturb the position of the furniture or tread with muddy boots on the carpet. Woe to the dandelion or groundsel that showed its luckless head; its life was doomed. The flowers were well tended, and several greenhouses and hothouses displayed their fragrant treasures.

Kate thoroughly enjoyed her visit—it was a relief to her to leave home for a while. She was always afraid of a recurrence to the Sir-George topic; the peace she now enjoyed did much to re-establish her health and spirits.

On her return home she found Mr. Merton's leg was progressing towards recovery. A few weeks had done wonders, and he was now allowed to be wheeled on a sofa from his bedroom to an adjoining dressing-room, where the girls sometimes came to cheer him by telling him any news that was going on, and reading to him. He felt quite ashamed of troubling his host so long,—for an invalid no doubt does give occupation to the members of a household,—and he began speak frequently of returning to Brushwood.

One afternoon all the family were out; Kate and Maria riding; Mrs. Ashwood and her husband visiting some friends; and Fanny superintending some gardening operations. Mr. Merton was all alone in the dressing-room reading, when he heard a gentle step outside the door.—It was Fanny's. She had come into the house to search for some labels, and after trying various closets and drawers, suddenly remembered that they were in a press in the identical room in which Frederick Merton was lying on the sofa. She—before looking in the press—asked him did he require any thing? was he comfortable? and such-like sick-room queries. He asked her to stay with him a little while; that he felt his spirits low; and gradually he unfolded to her the cause of his depression and anxiety, and how he loved her, but feared she was indifferent to his affection, &c., and so on; and a couple of hours

passed, and she was reminded of the object of her previous search by a servant telling her that the gardener was below stairs waiting for some commands.

"Oh, the labels!" exclaimed Fanny, suddenly jumping up and coloring deeply; "I had quite forgotten them." She found them immediately, gave them to the servant, saying she would return to the garden; and the man spread the news in the servants'-hall that something was going on between Miss Fanny and Mr. Merton, and that he would not wonder if there were a wedding soon; and at Mrs. Ashwood's return from her drive Fanny told her she only waited her consent to engage herself to Mr. Merton. Mrs. Ashwood had been only most anxious for the important question, so you may imagine her acquiescence was not long in coming. Mr. Merton was not very wealthy, but he had—besides his present income of a thousand a year—good prospects from an uncle of his, who was not married, and who had no other heir but his nephew.

Kate was delighted when she heard of her sister's engagement, and congratulated her warmly. "Are you not very happy and glad?" she asked her.

"Contented rather than glad," was the reply. "I don't care for him; I can quite appreciate his qualities of head and heart; I am sure I shall like him; every one seems satisfied, so I suppose I am too."

"Well!" said Kate and Maria in a breath, "was ever yet a woman so indifferent to her future fate as you are?" "Yes," replied Fanny; "I suppose you are astonished at my indifference. I don't care for him; still I feel a sort of security of happiness with him. I like the prospect of rather than otherwise; but I don't profess to be in love."

So Fanny accepted, rather than selected, her lot in life. She would have loved Mr. Heron passionately and enthusiastically; but that affection gone, crushed, she consented to marry Mr. Merton. Such marriages are very frequent and oftentimes the happiest. When people form to themselves very exalted ideas of the bliss they are to have when married, and of the perfection of the individual whose fate they are to share, disappointment is the almost inevitable result.—Maar idealise a supernatural excellence; and the reality falling short of the imagination, they become discontented and miserable. Those who will may take this little scrap of philosophy to heart.

CHAPTER XI.

"But knowledge to their eyes her ample page, Rich with the spoils of time, did never unfold; Chill geny repress'd their noble rage, And froze the genial current of the soul." Gray.

We shall devote this chapter to the relation of a characteristic incident amongst our Irish friends in this story. A poor man came one day to Fitz James, in much distress:

"Och, yer honor," said he (Paddy Ryan by name), "I don't know what to do; my little girl has gone off, and we can't find her nowhere."

"How is this?" returned Fitz-James; "your children always appeared to me so very respectable and well brought up."

"Yer honor," replied the poor man, "it's all for love of her mother. She died three months ago, and the poor girl has never done cryin' and keenin' over since. Shure we never knew what to do with the craitur iver since; she's distracted like. I set Mary always to watch her and not let her go; but Mary went to a fair on Tuesday last, and the little thing made off out of the house without a cloak or boots, just in her frock. She went off to the churchyard where the mother lies, full twenty mile, and not a bit crossed her lips that blessed morning. She often told Mary that if she sat up all night on the mother's tomb, the mother would come to see her. Before she left Bathence she would spend the whole day in the churchyard—you'd pity the craitur. Mick went off there Tuesday afternoon, and now he's come back, and she can't be found. Shure there's the river she might have fallen into, or she might have been run over by the train—she only ten years old last Midsummer."

"Have you," replied Fitz James, "given notice to the police? they would certainly help you in your search."

"We're only strangers in these parts," returned the man, "and I don't know any of them."

"Never mind that," continued Fitz-James;—"come with me and I can explain the case."

Fitz James walked with Pat Ryan to the barracks; but just as he reached them, he was met by one of the young Ryans, a lad of fifteen, who relieved his father's mind by saying that a slate had been picked up in the house on which the child had scribbled, "Don't be uneasy—I am going to see mother, I'll stay at Robert Dunne's."

"Thank God!" exclaimed the father. "O' yer honor, that's a comfort; but suppose the child niver got there safe? She is a small thing to be travelling about the country."

"Mary set off at once for Duane's house," continued the boy, "the very moment she found the slate, and she said she would be back as soon as she could; but, father, it is a long walk."

"Let me know," said Fitz-James on wishing good evening to Ryan, "whenever your child returns. I shall be very anxious to hear of its safety."

"Long life to yer honor," answered the man; "and I'll be up with you the very moment I hears of it."

That evening Fitz-James wrote a long letter to Charles. He told him of his midnight fray, of the man who was shot; and concluded by saying that, though the Irish were lawless, there was a bright side to the picture. He then narrated the story of the poor child who left home hungry and cold, to visit its mother's grave, unable to restrain its grief.

Two days after, Ryan came to Shanganahab with a joyous countenance.

"My child is found!" he exclaimed. "The day she left us she walked the full twenty mile to Rathence buryin'-ground. She prayed for her poor mother by her grave for a long time, and then she went to my cousin Robert Dunne's;—and Mrs. Dunne jumped with delight when she saw her, and she dressed her in grand clothes, and now she, sis she'll keep her altogether, as she has no childre now—she had one little thing, but it died; it was the dead image of Kate, and Mrs. Duane loves Kate for that, and she'll take and do every thing for her, God be praised: for I'm a very poor man, sir, and it's hard to keep bits in the mouths of them all."

"How strange," thought Fitz-James, "to see how all that has turned out! In Italy one could imagine such devotion; but not in these cold regions."

Fitz-James found out afterwards that this was the sister of the child who had warned him of the plot that was hatched against him.

CHAPTER XII.

"Some few there are, of sordid mould, Who barter youth and bloom for gold; Careless with what or whom they mate, Their ruling passion's all for state, For Hymen, generous, just, and kind, Abhors the mercenary mind; Such rebels groan beneath his rod, For Hymen's a vindictive god." Colton.

Another scene now opens to view. We must transport ourselves in fancy to one of the most luxurious hotels in that wealthy and luxurious capital, London. Breakfast is on the table in a richly-decorated sitting-room; the tea has just been made; and the busy, noisy urn, puffing and panting impatiently, is doing its best to blow off the lid, but unsuccessfully; eggs, muffins, crumpets, mutton-chops, &c., were lavished on the table; every thing in short that man could want. In a few moments a gentleman entered, and on the threshold he gave orders to his servant to have his clothes brushed and arranged, as he meant to ride in the afternoon. His dressing-gown was handsome, but had even more the appearance of excessive comfort; his feet were encased in warm slippers. He had large black whiskers and a well-gummed moustache. He is an old acquaintance, and certainly not a highly-esteemed one; his name is Sir George Fasten. He had come to town on business, the purport of which was getting money on the cheapest terms possible. He was not, as Kate Ashwood thought, a gambler; but he had contrived to dip his estates very considerably from other extravagances. In fact, he now owned but the name, while others received the rents of the estates.

Several months had elapsed since he had proposed for Kate. In coming to London he had, besides obtaining money, another object in view, namely, getting a snug little government appointment; and he wished to make use of the interest he possessed in the House of Peers for the furtherance of his purpose. He had a cousin, Lord Placeman, who was high in power.—When only the Honorable Adolphus he had been returned as Member for Rottenby; and Sir George had on this occasion made himself useful as general performer of the dirty work. It was he who had distributed bribes and promises *ad libitum*; had bought chickens and canary birds at prices ranging from £20 to £50, and then kindly made presents of the expensive wares to the dear children. He was the distinguished baronet who had contributed £100 towards the widows' asylum in the same borough; who had feasted the hungry voters and assuaged the thirst of the thirty; who had subscribed to the building of a new wing of the church; who had taken down the names of those who kindly interested themselves in the cause, but who expected to be remembered in due course, when the distinguished member should take his seat among the honorable members of the House of Commons. It was no less a person than our aristocratic

and humane friend who, so generously interested himself in the welfare of his poorer fellow-creatures, had with great liberality given a feast to the children of both male and female schools; and he had with immense condescension gone into the feast, and played blind-man's-buff and puss-in-the-corner, and had carried some of the smallest children round the room on his back; thereby gaining the good-will of all the mothers in the borough, who could not help feeling struck with admiration at the kind, good, simple-minded gentleman. Such virtue of course in due time received its reward. The bosom friend and companion of Sir George, the Honorable Adolphus Placeman, was duly elected Member for Rottenby, amidst enthusiastic cheering.—Now Lord Placeman could not but feel deeply grateful for such exertions; and it behoved him to make a suitable return, and procure for his cousin a situation in every way worthy of, as Sir George considered, his high position and character. This appointment once obtained, the way to the money matter would be considerably smoothed. Sir George, with estates heavily mortgaged and with the repute of having been turned out of "Stepstone on a charge of bribery (of course ill-founded) would have a bad chance of borrowing on equitable terms; but Sir George with a place of emolument that would inspire confidence would be a very different person. He determined, therefore, to pay his cousin an early visit, and lay his views before him.

Having finished breakfast, smoked a cigar, and read the paper, he set off for the Placeman mansion. He was informed on arriving there that his lordship was still in bed, but her ladyship would soon be visible. He was conducted by the servant to my lady's boudoir; this was an elegantly furnished little apartment with gilt tables and chairs, a lovely little chiffonier in the corner, with no end of little ornaments—mandarins and Swiss flower-girls were to all appearance in close conversation, while the rustic mountain-swaiss were evidently not suffering much from the pangs of jealousy. Here was a porcelain dog, whose stomach was filled with indigestible lucifer-matches, which constantly threatened to produce spontaneous combustion; a Hebe that never ceased pouring water from an inexhaustible river; and an Atlas who seemed weighed down by the huge world on his shoulders. Time rested on his scythe, and supported a French clock; and Cupid stood with bow bent at the loveliest of sea-nymphs. Near this was a rosewood Davenport, and on it lay an exquisite blotter, ivory and ebony inlaid.

As the clock struck twelve, Lady Placeman entered, in a most perfect morning dress of thick black-silk trimmed with rich velvet. She was just twenty-one, though her childish appearance might make one suppose her to be much younger. On entering she shook hands cordially with Sir George.

"Good morning," she said; "I am afraid you have been kept waiting a long time. Lord Placeman and I were at Lady Fanny Anderson's last night. You must not suppose we are always so late. Lord Placeman will be with you presently." She sat down on the sofa, and Sir George did own she was the loveliest creature he ever saw. She had a slight small figure, but in perfect proportion, with well-shaped head, blue eyes, and fair *crêpe* hair. But how was it, you may ask, that one so young should be the wife of Lord Placeman, who was long past fifty? How was it? you ask. O my dear friend, the answer is a simple one. She was the daughter of a poor country parson, and Lord Placeman was a nobleman, with houses in town and in country; was not that reason enough? Surely which of you ladies would not follow her example, if you got the opportunity? Imagine the pleasure of being transported from a dull vicarage, with no servants save the maid-of-all-work, warranted to cook, clean, and wash for the establishment, and where cotton gowns only covered, if not embellished, her slight graceful figure, to the felicity of having numerous domestics (male and female), gorgeous furniture, being clothed in silks and satin, and appearing at her Majesty's drawing-room in velvet and diamonds. Weigh well the contrast before you condemn her. 'Tis true Lord Placeman was a cross old rone, and drank hard, and was oftentimes querulous and out of temper. He looked a great deal older than he really was, owing no doubt to his laborious exertions in the cause of his country; for he had, since his glorious and unanimous election for the borough of Rottenby, been a diligent frequenter, first of the House of Commons, and afterwards of the House of Lords. He was subject to gout and rheumatism; but what did all this signify? Surely it was infinitely better to be Lady Placeman, and suffer sometimes from cross looks and a rheumatic disagreeable patient, than either have remained one of the six Miss Poorfares, whose father had a living of £400 a year; or have allied herself to poor Mr. Short-money, the delightful curate, with whom all the

young ladies in the parish were bewitched, and who sang so well in the choir on Sundays, and was always gay and jovial, though his house was very small and his stipend very slender.

But, however, we are diverging from the subject. His lordship soon after appeared in pretty fair humour, and Lady Placeman being informed that the carriage was at the door left the titled cousin *tele-a tele*.

Sir George, after a little circumlocution—in which he delicately insinuated all he had done for Lord Placeman, and alluded slightly to the fact that he had never received any compensation for such valuable services—came round to the point. He told his cousin he was decidedly hard up and wanted a place.

"You know, Adolphus," he said, "the style of thing,—say £1000 a year; of course, as a *sine qua non* there must be little to do, vacation at shooting-time, and a week now and then when the hunting comes on."

"I understand, my dear friend," replied Lord Placeman, "but at present those places are very difficult to be obtained; but trust me, George, if possible you shall have what you desire. I will make inquiries this very day, and endeavor to accomplish what you require. I suppose what you want is in fact to come to London for the season, and this little affair will just serve to cover the expense; eh, do I understand you rightly?"

"Not exactly," replied Sir George. "Fact is, I want it badly. Ah! that is to say when it suits you; I don't like to say so, but I am a wee bit hard up just now."

"I say, George," continued Lord Placeman, "why don't you look around you and pick up an heiress? Surely with your name and position you might easily get £50,000, or I am not sure that you might not get more. I wonder you never tried?"

"Fact is, Adolphus," returned Sir George, "the girls are so desperate wide-awake nowadays, terribly so; and if they suspect anything to be wrong in one's affairs, it is a difficult matter; that is the way with those at least who have anything worth taking. There was a young girl at the country last year who made up to me; she did make such a push to be my lady, you never say anything like it; nothing was too barefaced. But she would not answer; she had only £10,000 and a middling connection; nothing in the parliamentary line that might get a fellow on; and then £10,000 would be really nothing."

"What would you think of a salesmaster's daughter with £60,000? Would that answer? asked Lord Placeman. "I'm told there is such a commodity going a-begging. Would that suit?"

"Yes," replied Sir George; "do extremely well; but how could I set about it? you know I could not go into such low company to look after her; that would be totally out of the question. But about the place, you know: I should not like to be over worked; just sauntering down at ten o'clock; read the paper, do some work, of course—ha, ha! of course a little writing; then an hour for lunch, and hearing the band; then work a little again, desk-work,—rather a variety that,—for a couple of hours; and all over in time for Rotten Row. I know, Adolphus, you are the man to help a lame dog over a stile; I'm that lame dog at present—ha, ha, ha! and I want a shote. You comprehend?"

"Perfectly," replied Lord Placeman; "and your wishes shall have my best attention; and what about Miss Brimful?"

"Well, as to that," returned Sir George, "I'll think of it. If it could be managed without any trouble—but I've a shrewd suspicion she would find out that I was up to the neck in difficulties, and then adieu!"

He shortly after took leave.

"Well," thought he, "I have done one part of my business? now for the other."

CHAPTER XIII.

"Argent et tout cela se doit entendre, Et ne cois pas que ce fut pour la rendre; Car on depuis n'en ai ouï parler; Bref, le vicain ne s'en voulut aller Pour si petit." Marot.

Sir George returned to his hotel, dressed himself in his best, pulled on a pair of light gray gloves, and mounted his horse. He was in rather a melancholy state of mind. He had a very heavy bill falling due in a fortnight. It had been renewed several times. He was now paying £40 per cent for money. His credit was exhausted; his property, as we have said before, fully mortgaged; and now the great problem with him was, how he could extricate himself from his difficulties.

He recollected that he had once been of use to Mr. Goodale, a brewer, who, perhaps, would put him in the way of getting the needed. The hope of taking unto himself a wife who could pay his debts was not to be despised; but how could that be done in a fortnight? He resolved to try his chance with the rich brewer. He