THE COMET OF A SEASON!

By JUSTIN McCARTHY, M. P.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN BERKELEY SQUARE.

MONTANA had seen Lady Vanessa just as well as she had seen him. His quick eyes were not likely to miss her. He was looking out for possible observers of himself and Geraldine in their late evening walk; and when he heard the wheels of a carriage, he naturally looked that way. He saw Lady Vanessa, and saw that she had seen them, and he was very glad of it. It exactly suited his purpose. She was just the person whom he should have liked to see Miss Rowan and himself together, in that strange, mysterious way, toward nightfall. When Geraldine met him first, he led her at once to the path beside the railings of the square gardens. "Nobody will see us here," he said; "this place is very quiet. Come; here are the letters. Luckly for us, the moon shines brightly enough, and you can easily find the one you want."

He put a little bundle of letters into Geraldine's hand. She turned them hastily over, and was not long in finding the one she sought for. She felt her mind immensely relieved. She had got it now, and poor Melissa's secret was safe.

"I am really grateful to you, Mr. Montana," she said, and she felt all she said. "You have relieved me from a great anxiety, and enabled me to keep my word."

"It was nothing," he said; "and even if I had read your friend's letter, it could not have fallen into better hands. I should have respected her confidence even though I thought her foolish. But confess, Miss Rowan that it is rather an odd freak of fate which makes so many women send me declarations of love that I don't want, while the only woman I care about repulses me."

"I am much obliged to you, Mr Montana," she said again. "I must go now."

"No," he said "you must not go just yet. We will walk round this place for a little. I want to talk to you. I am glad of the opportunity. I want to talk to you seriously. You are not a sentimental and foolish girl, and you are not afraid to hear the truth. I must go back again to what we talked of to-day."

"Pray, don't go back to it," she said. "Don't let us say anything about it. Let me leave you now with this feeling of real gratitude to you. I have done a very odd and rash thing in coming to meet you here—don't make me sorry for doing it."

"The thing is too serious," Montana said, quietly, "for little scruples about forms and proprieties. I am glad to have you here alone because I must speak again of what I began to speak to you about to-day when Lady Vanessa interrupted us. I must put it in plain words. I want you to be my wife, Miss Rowan, I think you are the woman in all the world who is fitted for me, and for the kind of work I have to do, and the kind of life I have to lead; and so I put this to you plainly, and at once. I have no time for formal courtship and love-making, but I tell you I am in love with you; and, much more than that, that I believe you are necessary to me and to my life, and I want you to be my wife. Don't answer at once. I want you to think this over. Every day you think it over, believe me, you will find yourself growing more and more reconciled to it."

"Oh, it is impossible," she said.

"Just let me tell you," he said, "some of the advantages—not that you much care about ordinary advantages, I know; but there are some things that every woman of spirit and sense must care about. You are not rich, I know; I have heard that your mother is poor. In the ordinary course, you would have perhaps a hard enough struggle with the world, and I hate the idea of a girl like you, who is worthy of some high destiny, having to struggle with the world. Well, I am rich enough. I have a good deal of money. Money comes to me somehow, although I never went out of my way to get it. I never made money-getting any part of my ambition. But I am rich enough, and you could live in a way that would become you. And I am a success. I have made a name, and you would be known everywhere. More than all that, I have a great work to do, and you should share in it."

"What is the use of all that?" Geraldine asked. "It is thrown away on me, Mr. Montana. I don't even feel grateful for it, as I ought to do. It doesn't touch me. I am not afraid of a struggle with the world—not in the least. My mother would rather bear anything than that I married any one for whom I did not feel—" And then she stopped, embarrassed.

"You may speak out as plain as you wish," he said with his usual composure. "You can't tell me anything I don't know already. I understand your feelings toward me quiet well."

"Then, if you do, we needn't talk anymore about all this," she said, vehemently. "If you know all that I feel, you can't want any answer from me. You know how little chance there is of my—of my doing what you wish me to do."

"I know," Montana calmly answered, "that it is almost as certain as the rising of to-morrow's sun that you will be my wife."

Montana thoroughly enjoyed this struggle between will and will. He did not by any means feel all the confidence in his ultimate success that he professed; but he well knew how much in such a contest of resolve between man and woman, the man gains over the woman by the firm and repeated assertion that she cannot possibly escape him. In every act, and almost in every secret thought of Montana's, there was the same blending of reality and of play-acting. It was true that he had long convinced himself that the high destinies intended Geraldine Rowan to be his wife, and that she was needed to his career.

So much was true—so much at least was the fanatic's dream; the rest was play acting.

"I don't ask you for any answer now," he said.

"Let me answer No!" she exclaimed. "Oh, let me answer No, once for all. I shall never give any other answer—unless I am bewitched. Do, Mr. Montana, I beg of you, take my answer now, and let us be done with all this. I never could care about you, Mr. Montana—to marry you, I mean. I must speak the truth; something in you repels me."

"I know that quite well," Montana answered, with his quiet smile. "I know why it is. You shrink back for a while because you know you cannot help yourself."

There did seem to be something of this kind in Geraldine's mind. Her dislike for him did always seem to be compounded with a certain dread that she would one day or other come to have an influence over her.

"I don't care," he went on, "for the sort of thing that commonplace people call love. I might have had enough of that. I don't care whether the feeling you have now to me is like that which any girl just out of school may have for some young man. I much prefer your feeling of repulsion and fear."

"Fear! I have no fear. I am not afraid of you, Mr. Montana—no, not in the least. Why should I be?"

"Oh yes; you *are* afraid. You are afraid that I shall prevail in the end. You know I shall. You can't escape, Geraldine. Do you remember the first night I saw you? It was on the deck of the steamer as we were leaving New York Bay. The moment I saw you I said to myself 'That is the woman destined for me; there stands my wife.'"

He took her hand and held it.

For the first time she began to feel afraid of him. There was something in the expression of his eyes that compelled her to quail. *It seemed as if he were becoming a reality* instead of a sham. A soul was growing evident within him. Can one clearly realize what the sensation would be if, as he was looking on some theatric representation, of a ghost, some poor magic-lantern illusion, some Polytechnic combination of glass and cunning reflection, the thing began, beyond doubt, to turn into a very ghost—a spectre with wan eye and bodiless frame, with stars shining through it—an impossibility, yet a terrible, unmistakable reality, sending a shudder through every nerve of those who thus saw in their very presence the natural put on the supernatural? If one could imagine what the sensation of such awestricken spectators would be, he would have some idea of the feelings of Geraldine Rowan as her strange admirer held her hand and claimed her. The clasp with which he held her was not that which Geraldine would have supposed the grasp of a lover. It was not palpitating and tremulous, as with hope and fear and poetic tenderness. It was a cold, strong, stern grasp, quietly masterful. If Fate were to assume a bodily presence and take hold of a victim's hand, such perhaps would be its gripe.

What was that look in Montana's eyes? Geraldine had always thought that, despite their lustrous darkness, Montana's eyes were shallow, merely glittering, soulless. Behind the shining surface there seemed to her to be nothing. Now there was indeed something looking ominously out from a depth she had not thought of. Was it the light of passion, of unconquerable resolve, of high purpose? Was it—the thought passed quickly through her—the light of growing insanity? She felt as one might feel who, glancing carelessly into some cavern which he has passed and glanced into every day, becomes suddenly aware that his look is answered from the darkness this time by the burning eyes of a crouching tiger.

If Montana had known what was passing in Geraldine's mind, he could not have better chosen the words with which he broke the moment's silence. It was only a moment's silence, long as its strain seemed to Geraldine's overstrung nerves. The little second-hand of her watch had not made one round before Montana spoke.

"I believe there is a fate in this. It is your destiny, Geraldine, as well as mine. You can't escape it. I have tried many things, and never failed in anything yet. I shall not fail in this, believe me."

She did not resist his holding her hand. Had he given a warn, love-like pressure, she would at once and instinctively have torn her hand away. But it was still the same quiet, unmoving grasp—like that of some instrument.

"I don't believe in talk about fate and destiny," Geraldine said, keeping up her courage and composure as well as she could, but almost feeling as if she were beginning to have an uncomfortable belief in destiny all the same.

"Nor I," Montana answered. "I was only using the words that people commonly use. What I mean is, that I have always found a Higher Power directing me in every step I have taken, and I find it now. I never make plans and schemes as ordinary people do; I don't want them. I wait, and my course is directed for me. When the moment comes, I always know what to do. I am guided, I have been guided, to you from the first."

"Oh, pray, Mr. Montana, don,t talk of a special providence and heavenly guiadance about such poor things as the fortune of you and me. It makes me shudder; it sounds like blasphemy."

"Do you think heaven is further off from us now than it was in the days of the prophets?"

"No, I don't; but—I don't know. The same things don't occur, and anyhow we are not prophets, you and I"—she suddenly wished she had not coupled herself and him together in the "we"—"at least, I am not a prophet, Mr. Montana, and I don't believe that you—I don't believe there are prophets now."

There is need of guidence for men and women now as much as ever—ay, far more need than there was in the days when men were known to have speech of angles. Well, you will think this over; there is time enough. Remember, it is a great destiny to which I am calling you. Yours will not be like the life of an ordinary woman; no, not even if she were a queen. What could a queen do like the work you have to do? You will help to found a new civilization. Your name will be famous all over the world. Perhaps you will be the first woman who ever vendicated for woman her true place in the great work of the world."

"I don't believe I am worthy of any such high destiny," Geraldine said, forcing a smile. "You must find some one else Mr. Montana; some woman who would be equal to such a place, and who would like it. I am not equal to it, and I shouldn't like it."

"You don't yet know your own capabilities: who ever does until the moment comes?"

"The moment has come now for me to go away," she said, "and to get home. I ought not to have come. You have made me more sorry than ever that I did come; but I would venture a good deal for a friend. I ought to thank you, Mr. Montana, I know, and to feel grateful to you. I am sure many women would think this the very height of their ambition. But it is not for me, and I thank you as much as I can. I will thank you with all my heart and soul if you will only say that we shall not speak of this any more."

"We need not speak of it very often," he answered. "I shall only remind you of it when the time seems to me fitting. I am satisfied; I know that every day's thought you give to this is sure to work for me, and I know that the more you try to avoid thinking of it, the more it will be in your mind. Now I don't mean to keep you any longer. Shall I see you safely to your door?"

"Oh, no; please don't. Let me go alone. I shall be quite safe." She was already hurrying away, her whole horizon now being bounded by the mere hope of escape for that once.

He bade her "Good-night" quietly.

She hurried home in terror and a kind of shame. She gave Melissa her ransomed letter, and listened patiently to Melissa's interjections, partly of gratitude, partly of petulance, and made hardly any reply. She was inclined to say, more than once, "You don't know what it may have cost me to get you back that foolish letter which you wrote in your absurd transport." But she repressed herself, and said nothing of the kind. She felt like one who is in possession of some guilty secret, like one who has entered into an alliance with unholy and supernatural agents, and for whom henceforward the real world loses its firm reality; by whom anything may be expected, however strange. She was bitterly angry with herself for not having more vehemently and finally rejected Montana's appeals, and broke off with him once and for all. But she had committed herself, she felt, in asking him to return Melissa's letter. She had put herself into a secret alliance with him, and from that moment had to treat him with consideration and the semblance of gratitude. What distressed her especially was the secret, inexplicable fear that perhaps she might not be able to hold herself aloof from him in the end. Perhaps he might get such a control over her, and so isolate her from other sympathies and other confidence, that she might actually have to yield and marry him in the end. She did not allow this terror to get hold of her without reasoning stoutly against it, and telling herself again and again that the time of witchcraft is passed, as well as the time of dragging young girls to the altar willy-nilly. She tried to laugh at her own fears; told herself that as long as she was determined not to marry Montana, Montana could not possibly marry her. But all the same she saw how fate and her own fault, or her own quixotic generosity, or whatever it was, had brought her into a relationship with Montana which she could not at one time have believed possible; how he had made use of it to bring her and him into at least a momentary isolation from the rest of the world; and how she had more than once that night felt her spirit quail under the influence of that strange look which he fixed upon her. She had no friend to whom she could speak her mind, and the night was distressful to her, and she woke in the morning with a strange sensation, as if her old world had slipped away from her altogether and left her drifting in chaos.

CHAPTER XX.

A BREAKING-UP.

For some days Captain Marion and his household had heard nothing of Clement Hope. Geraldine thought that there was something ominous in his absence and silence. It occurred to her that something must be the matter with Mr. Varlowe. She said as much to Captain Marion. Captain Marion was on the point of leaving town with Mr. Aquitaine for the Northern city in which Aquitaine lived. They were going in obedience to a telegram from young Fanshawe. Fanshawe, when he heard of the incident in the Church of Free Souls, had naturally been aroused to keen interest and anxiety about it. If Mr. Varlowe's belief was not a delusion, then this Montana, this mysterious preacher and prophet and leader, must be the husband of his dead sister; and, if so, what a profound imposter he must be! Fanshawe was determined, if possible, to find out the truth of the matter, and he hurried off at once to the town of his birth—where pretty Miss Fanshawe had lived, and fallen in love, and married, and died. From that town he now sent to Captain Marion a telegram begging him to leave London and join him there at once, and Marion and Aquitaine were going this evening by the five-o'clock train. The women were to be left alone, except for the companionship of Mr. Trescoe, who was a moody companion enough for these last few days. Something had come over him. He was not like himself. He was silent, and sometimes almost stern, and now and then made Katherine short answers, which were new to her, and to which she did not reply with any of her usual spirit. There was something strange and cowed and fearful about Katherine's manner of late. She was wont to rule over her husband with the most undisguised sway. He used to live under a petticoat government open and avowed. His wife did not make the least affectation, as some judicious women do, of being the ruled while actually the ruler. She apparently took rather a pleasure in letting everybody see how completely her husband was her subject, and he seemed to enjoy his subjection. But things had changed these last few days. She was fearful; he was sullen.

"I wish we had not to go on this business," Marion said. He and Aquitaine and Trescoe were together. "I don't like it. It seems like a sort of detective job. It looks as if we suspected Montana of something."

"And don't we?" Trescoe asked.

"I don't; and I'm sure, Frank, you don't either, if you would only let your true nature have its way. I wouldn't stir a step in this business of Fanshawe's, only that I want to have the satisfaction of seeing his suspicions proved to be ridiculous, and of telling him so. Of course it is excusable enough in him to be astonished and alarmed and all that; but with us it is difficult."

"But look here, you know," said Aquitaine, "it is a terribly serious business for us all, as well as for Fanshawe. It might not be any matter in itself whether this fellow was Edmund Varlowe or was not; but it is a tremendously serious thing if a man who has such influence, and is carrying on the great enterprise he talks of, and entangling the fortunes and whole futures of thousands of men and women, should turn out to be an imposter in anything.

"I dont know what you are all about," Marion said, uneasily; "you are all down upon Montana. I never saw such a thing. I fully believe that man is as true as steel and as open as the sun. It is his very nobleness of character that gets him such enemies."

"Come, now," Aquitaine interposed good-humoredly, but with a certain firmness of tone, "you ought not to say that to us, Marion. You ought not to say that we don't like the man because of his noblesess of character."

"Oh no, no!" Marion said, emphatically, "I don't mean that, Aquitaine. I mean that his nobleness of character makes him enemies, and they send out stories about him, and fill the air with calumnies, and some of these things always stick, you know, and they impress even sensible men like yourself. I wish you could look at Montana as I do. I wish you knew him as I do, and then you would—"

"But what do you know about him?" Trescoe asked, in a tone very unlike that which he usually adopted toward his father-in-law. "You know nothing about him; you hear fine talk, and you see that the women all round are taken with him."

"I don't see anything of the kind," Marion interposed; "some of them are as unjust to him as you are."

"I don't want to be unjust to any one," said Trescoe, "but I have had enough of *him*, and I won't stand it much longer."

"Won't stand what?" Marion asked, looking him fixedly in the face.

"Well, I don't know about that," said Trescoe; "or, rather, I do know—I know what I mean—and I won't stand it much longer."

He turned away and left them.

"Now, Marion," said Aquitaine, "don't you really see the change that is made even in that young fellow by your friendship with Montana?"

Captain Marion grew a little redder and hotter than was usual with him.

"I see that Trescoe's in a bad humor about him, and I don't say he's quite wrong. As you seem to know something about this, Aquitaine, and as you come to the point, I must say I do wish my daughter Katherine did not express her admiration of Montana quiet so openly. I don't wonder if Trescoe is annoyed, and I think he ought to have stopped it long ago; but then one must not blame the girl. He is very handsome, very fascinating, and kind to women in a grave, fatherly sort of way, and honorable and all that; and you know, Aquitaine, she is not the only one."

"No," said Aquitaine, with a sigh, "she is not. There are others as foolish as she; and I wish to God my little girl had never seen him. His coming has only brought discomfort to us all, and it is well if it does not bring some unhappiness before we have done with it."

Marion himself was not without some of the same uneasy feeling; but he was loyal to his friend, who, he honestly believed, was misjudged and misprized; and he would not give him up. He thought, however, it would be well to make some change in the arrangements he had laid out for the holiday—the holiday which was to have brought so much pleasure, and which already seemed withering away into mere discomfort. He thought, perhaps, it would be well that Trescoe and his wife would go to the Continent at once, and leave the rest of them to follow; that would be something. Aquitaine, of course, could easily take his daughter home whenever he would, and that would remove another embarrassment. There would only remain Sydney Marion and Geraldine, neither of whom appeared particularly sensitive to Montana's attractions. Thus, Marion, thought, things would go all right again, and he would really get from Montana a clear, precise, business-like explanation—he had laid great emphasis on the word "business-like"—of his project in all its details. Captain Marion actually felt business-like as he mentally repeated the word. It seemed to him to solve much of the difficulty. Yes, it must come to that, of course, in the end, even between the closest friends. Business-like it must be; business-like—he was resolved on that.

His daughter Katherine came upon him that moment. Aquitaine had left the room.

"Things seem pretty bad, papa," she observed. "I never saw Frank in such moods as he is getting into lately. He talks of taking me away to the Continent at once."

"Well, well!" said Marion; "I think he is quite right. I wonder he did not do it before. You know I spoke to you, my dear, about this. I told you your goings on about Montana would never do; people would be sure to misunderstand them."

"I am sure I don't know what I have done," Katherine expostulated. "You all rave about him, or at least you did as long as you liked; and because I can't help thinking him a handsome man, and a very agreeable man, everybody is down upon me. Frank is changed altogether; he goes on as if I had done something improper."

"No, no, Katherine, don't talk in that flippant way; it is painful. Nobody supposes you have ever done or thought anything improper. But it does not look well when you women get vying with each other in admiration about any man; and I can't blame Frank for not liking that kind of thing—no husband would like it. Be a good girl, my dear, and a sensible girl, and drop it, in Heaven's name; and Frank and you will get on as well as ever."

"I don't think you ought to listen to silly stories and scandals," said Katherine; "I can tell you, papa, if you mind everything that everybody says, you would find that I am not the only member of the family people are talking about."

"No!" said Marion. "Sydney in the swim too? Well, I certainly should not have thought of that." He was rather amused than otherwise at Katherine's attempt, as he understood it.

"Oh no, it is not Sydney," his daughter coldly answered.

"Well, but there aren't any more of you. If it is not Sydney, I don't know who it is."

"There is one more of us, papa," said Katherine. "We are three, are we not?"

"Oh, it concerns me, then," said Marion; "and pray, my dear, what do people say about me?"

"They say that you admire Geraldine Rowan a great deal, papa, and that Sydney and I are to have her soon as our step-mother. I am sure I don't wonder. I think she is a very good girl and a very charming girl, and I don't see what you could do better. But if people talk about us you need not wonder, for I can assure you they talk about you just as well."

This was a startling piece of news to Captain Marion. For a while he was silent—more than silent; he was absolutely speechless. This had never occurred to him before. He had never thought it possible that the idea would come into anybody's head. He had gone about with Geraldine just as freely as if she were his own daughter, and it always seemed to him that the mere fact of a man's having grown daughters ought to exempt him altogether from gossip of that kind. Was it possible that any people could talk in that way because he was seen occasionally with a young woman, whose age was no greater than that of the youngest of his own girls?

"What stupid nonsense!" he exclaimed at last.

"Well, yes, of course, if you say it is nonsense," Katherine said, with a malicious tone in her voice, "and if you really mean that. I should believe everything you said, papa, and if you say you really don't intend anything of the kind, of course that is enough for me. But you mustn't wonder if outsiders are not so easily convinced; and then, you know, much more unlikely things have happened. We hear every day of girls marrying men who are years and years older than you, and not half so good-looking or attractive; and I must say that our Geraldine is a very attentive girl, and does cling on to you in a very friendly, fond kind of way—highly natural, to be sure, and a proper expression of gratitude on her part; only the world is apt to think that that sort of thing sooner or later ends in a wedding-ring, don't you know, papa. Anyhow, that is what people say, and I thought it only kindness to tell you."

"Great kindness, indeed," Marion said, "very great kindness, and very pleasant to hear, too. How can people say such things, and how can other people listen to them? I believe it is always one's own family who listen most readily to any silly gossip about one."

"Quite so," said Katherine, with a sigh as significant as italics; "exactly; that is just what I was saying before we struck on this subject of conversation. The members of my own family were the first, indeed I think the only persons, to listen to foolish gossip about me. So you see, papa, after all, we are in the same boat. It is very sad. They talk silly gossip about us all; but it is a comfort that our consciences are at rest, and we can bear it."

Katherine disappeared, happy at having discharged her shaft, and believing that by doing so she had secured two great objects—satisfaction for her personal anger, and immunity from any farther criticism with regard to her conduct.

The condition of things was not made pleasanter by Mr. Aquitaine's sudden announcement of his resolve to take Melissa back to the North with him. She could return to London later, he said, when they were to start for the Continent; but in the meanwhile she must go home with him. Perhaps her mother wanted her; anyhow, she *must* go. Her mother had never wanted her in her life, or, for that matter, wanted anybody else. To be allowed to lie on a sofa and do nothing was Mrs. Aquitaine's highest idea of enjoyment; and enjoyment with her was always a duty. Melissa knew well enough why she was taken home. She knew that her father was taking her away from Montana's presence and that he must suspect quite enough to turn him into a watchful guardian of her, and to make her life with him an uneasy one for the present, and something very different from what it used to be. She had, however, no choice but to submit. She did not even think of resistance. Geraldine and Sydney hurried off with her to help her in making her preparations and packing her trunks. Geraldine and she hardly exchanged a word on the subject, except once when Sydney Marion had left them together, and the poor girl clasped Miss Rowan's hand, and said, "Oh, Geraldine, thank you ever so much for having got me back my letter! Is not my father changed? Thank God, he does not know all! Oh, here's Sydney!"

That was all that passed between Geraldine and her, but it was enough to make Geraldine feel new pity for the foolish little girl, and new gladness that, at any risk to herself, she had got back Melissa's letter.

There was a strange embarrassment in Geraldine's manner to Capt. Marion and in his to her. These two had taken so frank a liking to each other from the very beginning, that they might almost have seemed to any observer, or seemed to each other, like an affectionate father and daughter. There was something in the nature of the one specially sympathetic with that of the other. Geraldine was so much more intelligent than either of Marion's own daughters that she had obtained a sort of leadership over his sweet, sunny temper, and his sympathetic but not very vigorous nature. It was strange that when they were parting now, and he was going on a journey which he thought might be productive of some momentous consequences, they two should not be confidential, should be restrained in manner to each other. Geraldine was embarrassed because of the secrets she was keeping. She felt at moments strongly inclined to unburden her mind to Capt. Marion, to tell him all, at least so far as her part of the story was concerned, and trust to him to guide and guard her. This she felt at moments inclined to do, and then shrunk back from the confession. Had she been left alone with Marion at this time, it would have probably come to a disclosure of all her feelings and her troubles. But she had not the opportunity, and the condition of her mind, divided between a wish to disclose all to him and a shrinking back from any disclosure, put into her manner an embarrassment which was almost distressing to herself, and which Marion could not but see. Naturally, after the hints that Katherine had so kindly given him, he felt embarrassed in Geraldine's presence. He had never before for one moment thought of himself as playing in anybody's mind the part of a lover and future husband to the girl. He saw Geraldine's embarrassment, and assumed that it came from the same source as his own. Therefore they parted, not coldly, but without the affectionate warmth that would have been frankly made manifest at another time. All this added new discomfort to Marion's unwilling journey North. Nor did he know how he and she were ever again to associate on the same frank, sweet, and friendly terms as those which had always prevailed until Montana's ill-omened coming and Katherine's ill-natured story.

The parting was melancholy. Every one seemed to feel that the promised reunion of its members was a promise in which nobody believed. None of them expected to see that little group united again, or had any faith now in the long-looked-for Continental trip. Katherine was perhaps the only one of the party who was a little glad at the breaking-up, and whose distress, at all events, was solely on her own account. For several reasons she was glad that Melissa was going away, and would have been rejoiced if Geraldine had been going too.

"I have written to Clement Hope," said Captain Marion, turning back just as he was leaving. "I have sent a messenger to him with the letter. I am uneasy about him and about his father. As I shan't be here when the answer comes, one of you girls can open it. Do whatever you think best, if there is anything to be done."

At last the parting was made. There were some tears among the girls and some awkwardness among the men, and then the separation was accomplished, and Geraldine, Katherine, and Sydney were left alone—alone, that is to say, except for the guardianship of Mr. Trescoe, who seemed only too glad to escape their company and to smoke a sullen cigar all to himself.

CHAPTER XXI.

HURT TO THE DEATH.

The house was very dreary to the three forlorn young women. It seemed as if they were to have a dull monotonous evening of it. Sydney was out of spirits. Katherine was out of temper; Geraldine was full of nameless boding, expecting at every moment that something strange would happen. It was not long before the messenger came back with an answer from Clement Hope. Clement's letter was short and sad. It only said that his father had fallen suddenly ill a day or two ago, and was growing worse and worse; that he began to be alarmed about him; that Mr. Varlowe would not see any doctor, and if Captain Marion could spare half an hour it would be a relief to Clement to see him, for he was alone.

What is to be done?" Sydney Marion asked, looking blankly at her companions.

"Oh, somebody must go to him at once," said Geraldine. "You *can't* leave the poor boy all alone in that dismal old house, with his father, perhaps dying. Somebody must go to him at once."

"All very well, Geraldine," Sydney reasoned; "but who is to go? Papa won't be back for days; Frank is out."

"Frank wouldn't be of any use," his wife declared

"Somebody must go, all the same," said Geraldine. "I will go if nobody else does?"

"You'll go?" Sydney exclaimed, amazed out of all her ideas of propriety and the fitness of things; "but, my dear Geraldine, you can't go."

"Why not" Geraldine asked.

"You don't mean to say you would go alone and see Mr. Hope?"

"No, I sha'nt go alone," said Geraldine, "because, Sydney, you will go with me."

"Oh-no, dear," said Sydney. "I can't do that; I could not do it. That would not be proper at all. It would be ridiculous. What could we do to help Mr. Hope? We could do nothing."

"But it is not a case of doing anything. It is a case of having somebody near him to say a friendly word. Will you come, Katherine."

"I think you had better go, Katherine," said Sydney, "if somebody must go; if Geraldine will have it."

"Indeed I will," Geraldine said; "I am going to put on my things this moment."

"I can't believe that you are really going," said Sydney, remonstrating.

"Well," Geraldine replied, composedly, "if you will look out of the window, and will only accept the evidence of your senses, in five minutes you will see me get into a hansom cab; and if you can hear through the noise in the streets, you will hear me tell the cabman to go to Mr. Hope's house."

"Then, you had really better go with her, Katherine," said Sydney. "You are a married woman."

Geraldine smiled. "That will give an air of perfect propriety. Come, then, Katherine; I shall be delighted to take you with me. The protection of a married woman will be an unspeakable comfort and satisfaction to me."

"I can't go," Mrs. Trescoe said. "Frank may come back at any moment. He might not like it."

"Oh, to be sure," said Geraldine; "he might not like it; and of course you could not think of taking any step without first consulting him, and having his permission.

This was sarcastic. Geraldine was growing annoyed.

"I should not like to go," said Katherine. "I don't think I ought to go. I don't see that it is any affair of mine. I can't assist the young man."

Katherine expected Montana to come in that evening, and she was only too delighted at the chance of having him all to herself, or nearly all to herself.

"Then you won't go?" Geraldine asked her, decisively.

"I *can't* go," said Katherine. "I can't go running all over the town after everybody who chooses to fall sick. If I fell sick myself, I should not expect Mr. Hope's father to come and see me."

"All right," said Geraldine; "I am going, anyhow."

"If you *will* go," said Sydney, "somebody must go with you, and I will go. I will do anything rather than leave you to go alone. Yes, I will go." She spoke with the heroic resolve of a soldier who is determined to lead a forlorn hope, even though he himself has no faith in his mission. She compressed her lips. Her cheeks were pale as she spoke the resolve to do or die. If Geraldine must rush into the jaws of impropriety, it should not be said that she rushed there alone—that no friend stood by her to save her from danger, or to share it and perish with her. Sydney Marion at that moment knew herself a heroine.

Geraldine laughed good-humordly at the resolve.

"Well, come along, then, as quickly as possible. There is no time to be lost. We need not spend many moments in bedizening ourselves. We are not going to a dinner-party or a ball; come along, Sydney." She swept poor Sydney out of the room, and presently Katherine, looking out of the window, saw the two girls get into a hansom cab and drive away.

Very dim and dismal looked the old house in the fading light of gray evening as the girls got out at the gate. There was an atmosphere of decay and of death all around it. The gravel crunched under their feet with a melancholy, disheartening sound that brought funeral omens. The knocker, although they used it as gently as possible, seemed to send ghostly, cavernous echoes through the house. An old woman who opened the door seemed a little surprised at seeing the girls; and when they asked for Mr. Hope, the sensitive conscience of Sydney Marion made her believe there was a look of startled propriety on the aged lady's face. She brought them into a large, gaunt, heavily furnished dining-room, and left them to wait there.

"I am afraid we ought not to have come," said Sydney, in a low, awe-stricken voice. "I don't think it looks right, Geraldine. I don't think that old woman looks pleased to see us."

"My dear," said Geraldine, "I did not come to see that old woman, and I don't care whether she looks pleased or displeased If I can't be of any use, I am sure Mr. Hope would rather I did not stay; then I can go away. There is no harm done, don't you see, in any case."

"But," Sydney pleaded, "two girls coming alone in this way to see a young man—do you really—now, really—think it is quite right? I know you get extraordinary ideas—girls in America; but in England, you know—this is England—"

"This certainly is England; there I certainly agree with you."

"Well, don't you think it strange?"

"I don't think it strange," said Geraldine, "that girls should like to be of some help to somebody—even in England; and if it is strange the sooner we get over the strangeness the better. Anyhow, here we are, and we can't run away—at least, I don't mean to."

The door opened, and Clement entered, looking very handsome for all his melancholy, and with a flush on his face caused by surprise and the excitement of seeing his unexpected visitors. He rushed up to them and clasped warmly a hand of each.

"Now, this is so good and kind of you! I wrote to Captain Marion, and I never expected that anybody else would come."

"He would have come," said Geraldine, "but he had to leave town, and can't return perhaps for a day or two. We thought somebody ought to come, and so we came at once."

This was heaping coals of fire upon the head of Sydney, this use of the word "we;" thus taking her into the enterprise, and making her a full sharer in the evident credit it gave them in Clement Hope's eyes.

"Can we be of any use?" Sydney said, taking courage.

"Oh yes," Clement answered, with looks beaming with gratitude, "you can. I am so lonely here. I don't know what to do. My father never was ill before. I never saw any one ill."

"May we go and see him?" Geraldine asked."

Sydney Marion felt that she could hardly stand erect while things were going on like this. In one moment they were being carried away to see a sick man in his very bed-room! True, he was an old man; but old or young—only think! Two girls thus taken off to see him, before they had time to collect their thoughts, and taken off under the escort of a young man!

Geraldine was both helpful and skilful. She had not been in the sick man's room a moment before she began altering its arrangements. She opened a window here, drew down a curtain there, quietly displaced chairs, felt the old man's hot hands and his damp forehead, sprinkled the room with aromatic vinegar, and seemed to find something to do in every corner. Sydney stood by helpless, looking sympathetic and feeling so, but not having the least idea of anything she could do to help any one.

Geraldine meanwhile was putting questions all the time to Clement, in a low tone, about his father's condition—when he had begun to grow ill; when his mind had begun to wander.

"He would not have a doctor." Clement said; "he never would; the bare idea makes him angry."

"Still, I think you must have a doctor now," Geraldine said; "and you must have a nurse at once—a really helpful one, not some dreadful, old Mrs. Gamp. I will go myself—Sydney and I will go and find out something about a nurse. There is nothing we can do here just for the present, and we will come back again."

In a moment they were out of the gate and on the main road, looking for a hansom cab.

"Do you know anything about nurses?" Sydney asked.

"Nothing at all; but we must get one."

"To you know where to go for one?"

"No. I don't think I do; but we can easily find out, can't we?"

"What an extraordinary girl you are!" Sydney said. "You don't know London particularly well; you don't know anything about a nursing institution; you don't know where to go and find a nurse; and yet you say you will find one"

"Of course," said Geraldine composedly.

"But what will you do first?"

"Well, I think the best thing we can do is to go into a chemist's somewhere, and ask. Perhaps he will show us a directory, or tell us something about a nursing institution, and then we can go there. It is all quite easy. What on earth is your difficulty?"

They found a nurse; they found a doctor. The difficulties that Sydney dreaded began to disappear with marvellous rapidity. They went home and left a messge for Mrs Trescoe to say that they might possibly stay out all night. Sydney had by this time plunged so deeply into utter lawlessness and impropriety, that she had almost lost all consciousness of the conventionalities of maiden decorum, and would not have been surprised or shocked at any resolve Geraldine might announce. They went back to the sick man's house. The doctor did not think there was much to be done more than to have Mr. Varlowe carefully watched and nursed. He shook his head over the case; but took it with the practical composure of the physician to whom all that sort of thing is commonplace, and who regards the death of a patient as an event of no greater moment than his starting off on a railway journey. He persisted in regarding Geraldine as Clement's sister, and complimented her on being more composed than her brother. She explained the real facts to him; but he did not pay any attention. He told her two or three stories of persons exactly like Mr. Varlowe in age, condition, and temperament, who, having previously enjoyed good health, were suddenly taken ill like him and died. But of course, he said, it did not necessarily follow that Mr. Varlowe was to die; only it was as well to be prepared. He said he would call in the morning, and see how things were looking. Geraldine was glad when he went away.

Geraldine was standing in a room on the ground floor, which served as a library or study for Clement in ordinary times. She was looking out upon the canal. It was the season of the year when there is hardly any night. The gray of twilight is succeeded imperceptibly by the gray of dawn; the one hardly dead before the other begins to live. Her thoughts were going back to another house of death, in which, too, she had watched the dawn succeed the dusk, and tears came into her eyes. Clement entered the room, and she kept her face turned to the window, that he might not see her tears. The sound of wheels was heard, and a brougham stopped at the door.

"Look, Miss Rowan," Clement said; "here is Mr. Montana. Is it not like him to come in this way? I might have known he would come; but I didn't think of it. I never sent for him."

Geraldine made no answer. A nameless fear went through her. She thought there was something unnatural, something unholy in Montana's appearance at the death-bed of the old man, whose death she felt sure was hastened by Montana's own words and acts. Whether Montana was true man or false, this was true all the same. Yet she could not help thinking that Montana must be right. It was surely impossible that he could voluntarily present himself at the deathbed of a father whom he had repudiated, and whose death, in all human probability, his cruelty and treachery had brought about. "I must have wronged him," she thought.

Montana came in, quiet, sweet, not surprised at anything; accepting Geraldine's presence there as if it were in the ordinary course of things.

"I called at Captain Marion's," he explained, "and Mrs. Trescoe kindly told me of what had happened. I thought, perhaps, I could be of some service, and I came on; I would have come long before this, only I did not know of it. Mrs. Trescoe only told me as I was leaving; she probably thought I knew. Mr Trescoe offered to come with me, but it was not necessary. We are quite enough."

"You are very, very kind," Clement said, "but you must not stay too long."

"I shall stay for the present," Montana answered; "I shan't leave you alone here, Clement."

"Miss Rowan was so kind as to come—"

"It was just what I should have expected of Miss Rowan," Montana said; and Geraldine was really pleased."

Geraldine felt that she could almost have admired Montana at that time She began now to understand how it was that in moments of excitement, or even of danger, brave men could look to him, as she knew they had done, could ask for his guidance, and could trust to it. The moment he entered the place he took, as it were, the command of everything. A sense of relief and security, of something almost like happiness, settled upon the watchers in that melancholy house the moment he had come. It was as when the captain suddenly aroused in the night of storm, takes charge of the vessel himself, or when a veteran general is hastily summoned to the leadership of a distressed army. Montana knew something—knew a good deal, indeed—of medicine and of surgery, and understood all that pertains to the hygiene of the sick chamber. He was quite easy and firm; had an eye for everything that needed to be done; and knew exactly what every one of that little party best could do. To Geraldine he said once, dropping the words into her ear as he passed, "There is really nothing to be done that can be of much service. We can only smooth the way for him. The time is not far distant."

Geraldine gave a little start. She had expected as much, and yet it was a shock to hear it.

"Is it a question of days?" she asked.

"Of days at the most," he said. "Very likely a question of hours."

Geraldine noticed that he spoke to Clement in a more re-assuring way—not, indeed, holding out any hope, but still speaking with less suggestion of immediate danger.

"Clement, my dear boy," he said in his kindliest tone, "there is something I want you to do for me. It is not much use your being here just now, and it would do you good to move about a little. I have something at my lodgings which I think would be very soothing and refreshing for our poor old friend, and which I have often found to act with good effect in restoring consciousness to a wandering mind and failing nerves. It is a mixture that the Indians make out of various roots and barks of trees. You can easily find it. Go to my lodgings as quickly as you can—here is my latch-key—and in my bedroom, in the dressing-case—this is the key of it—you will find this one bottle. I have a little stock of it, but I only keep just one bottle there for use. Bring it back. No one could find it so well as you except myself, and I really think I am likely to be of more use here than you are. When you come back, we can try it with our dear old friend, and I feel sure it will do him good."

Geraldine was present when this was said. She looked surprised. It seemed strange that Mr. Montana should send Clement out of the way just then, but she assumed that it was done with the kindly purpose of distracting the young

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