

"Ah! that's the scheme, Gabb, and it's a doing Mr. Delamere a service to get him out of this fire; for he's not one of your wild ones, it's all love and honorable marriage that he means. Poor young gentleman! And the Missus wouldn't object to setting aside of the eldest son; then it 'ud be a wondrous long time for you and me to wait, Gabb. For there'd be no change in the family for years maybe."

This reference to their own affairs introduced a tender element into the conversation, which we need not follow; certain it was that Mabel's affairs, as far as Gabb was concerned, were by no means in a favorable train.

CHAPTER XI.

A Decision—a Gattle—and an Accident.

"I this infer,
That many things having full reference
To one consent—may work contrariwise:
As many arrows—loosed several ways,
Fly to one mark."

Shakespeare.

Mrs. Burnish was not visible at the breakfast-table the following morning. She had passed a sleepless night, and her husband reproached himself for having asked her to go to the meeting. He also, on replying to Mabel's inquiries, as she poured out the coffee, said, "The fact is, she needs country air; we have been in town too long. I think next week or so, a run in the country to my brother's place in Sussex would do her and the children good, and you too Miss Alterton; you are looking pale this morning."

This was the first time that any remark indicating personal interest had fallen from Mr. Burnish's lips to Mabel. She felt pleased in proportion to its rarity. Mr. Delamere raised his eyes to her face, and the change in her color could not have failed to have been observed, perhaps put to the score of pleasure at his notice, by the philanthropist, if he had not been just then occupied with his newspaper.

Both Mabel and Delamere wished for an opportunity of an interview, but for very different reasons. The reflections of the night—a night of wakefulness and tears—had decided Mabel on the course she ought to pursue; and as she feared the treachery of her own heart, she wished quickly to get a painful effort over, and be restored once more to the consciousness of rectitude, even if she had an aching breast. The greater the pang, the more need of resolution and promptness, argued poor Mabel; while a strange tightness came in her throat, and a dull heavy throbbing in her temples marked the strife between duty and inclination.

There were applicants to see that morning, and a basket of begging letters to look through. Mabel's difficulty was, that Mr. Burnish usually spent his mornings in the library, and Mr. Delamere's horse came at ten o'clock to take him to business. But on this day Mr. Burnish, by medical direction, commenced riding in the morning, and set out a full hour before his son left. The little girls went up stairs to the piano for their morning's practice, and Mabel, still busy with the basket, lingered in the reception-room. Delamere, like a young man, was not slow to remark that she did not retire as soon as usual, and to interpret the matter very favorably. The least symptom that Mabel reciprocated his feelings filled him with a kind of delirium of pleasure, that scattered far and wide all the thoughts that Shalton Kreen had suggested. His father had no sooner mounted for his morning ride, than Delamere tossed aside the papers that had appeared before to engross him, and entering the little room as if to pass through it to the library, he paused a minute at the table where Mabel was sorting the letters, and merely uttered the words—

"Miss Alterton."

Mabel raised her head instantly. There was none of the charming confusion in her face that made it look like a flower-bed ruffled by the wind, and that Delamere so loved to see. She was a little paler than usual, and her eye-lids were drooped like white rose-leaves over her full eyes; but there was resolution on her brow, and in the carriage of her head, though her curved lips quivered a little, as she said—

"Mr. Delamere Burnish, I wish to speak with you, now, at once, and for the last time."

"Oh, no—no!" said Delamere, startled by her manner, and hardly knowing what he said, but going hastily round the table, and making an effort to take her hand. Mabel folded her arms, and pressed them tightly to her waist, to still the beating of her heart, and, in a concentrated voice, said—

"A few words will suffice, sir. After what you said last night, I cannot affect to misunderstand you. My position in this house forbids me, in honor, to listen to you, and ought to restrain you from making me the subject of attentions that would not fail to be utterly disapproved by your family."

"Miss Alterton—Mabel! tell me one thing—leave all else—tell me but this, may I hope that my feelings are—"

"Sir! it is to no purpose your thus pressing me to listen to your declarations," interrupted Mabel, taking refuge in her pride. "What have you ever seen in me that would lead you to suppose that I would steal clandestinely into any family? Think better of me, and set yourself a nobler task than making your father's house the scene of an attachment—a pursuit rather—that he would—"

"An attachment! Oh, don't alter the word, surely it is cold enough! Call it a passion—a principle that can cease but with my life." He trembled as he spoke, and Mabel, for a moment, quailed before his vehemence as he continued, "My father will ultimately approve. Approve! he will feel the honor when his eyes are opened—when he knows you. My mother—Mrs. Burnish—loves you already."

"Yes; as the governess of her children; and that very allusion to her regard nerves me to my duty."

"Ah, then, you want nerving as you call it! It is not your will that prompts these cold words—this reversed manner. Oh, dear Mabel! leave all this worldliness to lower natures steeped in conventionalism. Be yourself! Take pity on one who has had but little of the love—the home-joy—that makes the very flower and perfume of life."

Mabel was losing ground, and she felt it; so she interrupted Delamere, by saying, "Pardon me sir! I must be heard; and my time is limited. I am confided in here, and I cannot repay that confidence with perfidy. No pleading, and no amount of passion, could justify me to myself if I sanctioned this. Do you understand me? I must speak plainly. I, too, have a father, who would not choose his daughter to dispose of herself."

"Let me seek him, at once, without delay."

"No, once more, sir, no—most distinctly, no! I have other objections."

"Ah, then, it is true you are engaged? Miss Alterton, don't trifle with me, I'm desperate!"

"No, I am not—hush!" said Mabel, frightened at his vehemence. At that moment the door opened, and Gabb came in suddenly, and, affecting to start, she dropped a curtesy, muttered she did not know anyone was there, and was going suddenly.

"Stop," said Mabel, following her. "What is it you want?"

"I came for the letter basket, Miss."

"I have already had Mrs. Burnish's directions about that, and am sorting them," said Mabel, calmly returning to her chair, while Mr. Delamere had gone into the library. "Will you tell Charles I am ready to see the applicants," she added.

Gabb left the door slightly ajar, and went away, evidently for the moment overawed by Mabel's manner. In an instant Delamere returned, and Mabel said severely,

"You see, sir, in what a distressing position you place me. Let this morning's conversation suffice, if you have any sentiments of honor and gentlemanly feeling, unless you wish to drive me from this house. I am your sisters' governess—I can never be anything but that to you."

Pallid, with gleaming dilated eyes, and nostrils quivering, as if heated to a white heat, Delamere confronted Mabel, who returned his gaze with a proud composure, for her spirit was roused. He was about to speak when Charles opened the door, and a poor old woman came forward asking for a letter for 'The Convalescent Institution.' "Please, sir, your 'oss is ready," uttered in Charles's flat voice, formed an anti-climax to the scene, and, swallowing his grief and rage, or both, Delamere was seen in a few moments galloping down Portland Place at a speed very unusual.

"Hanged if I know what to make of him," said Charles, gazing after his master; "he looks more as if she'd said 'no' than 'yes' to my mind. I don't think a 'appy lover ever looked like that, and so I shall tell Gabb. Though she said he was a-proposing, I doubt we're on the wrong scent arter all."

During the time that Mabel, with an agony of pent-up feeling, oppressing heart and brain, was compelling herself to listen and reply to the usual charity cases, Gabb was improving her opportunity while dressing Mrs. Burnish, convinced that there was no time to lose. She began by saying how "very bad she thought Mr. Delamere looked lately."

"Oh, he's very well," said Mrs. Burnish; "if his dear papa only led such an easy life."

"I thought, mem," said Gabb, as she brushed back her mistress's hair, "that the agitations Mr. Delamere had lately had been bad for him."

"Agitations? ridiculous! what do you mean?"

"Why, mem, I don't know as I'm at liberty to speak; only servants, mem, have their eyes as well as ladies."

Mrs. Burnish's curiosity was now completely roused. "What! has Charles been telling you anything of Mr. Delamere?"

"Oh, dear no, mem; there ain't a faithfuller servant than Charles; he would on no account say one word about his master's secrets," said Gabb, with a manner that plainly indicated there were secrets. "It's nothing, mem, but something I've seen myself."

"And what, pray, is this wonderful 'something,' you goose?" said Mrs. Burnish, longing to know, yet affecting to disapprove.

"Oh, only, mem—that is, mem, perhaps Mr. Delamere knew Miss Alterton before she came here."

"Mr. Delamere and Miss Alterton, what of them?"

"Oh, I thought, mem, they might perhaps have been engaged, as he's so fond of her."