

CHAPTER II.

TWINING THE STRANDS.

IN spite of having been later than usual the previous night Mrs. Acland was up betimes the morning after her step-daughter's return. She was a careful methodical woman, and before her husband had issued from his dressing-room she had descended to the dining-room in the neatest of morning gowns, and had pointed out one or two streaks of dust in the remoter corners of the sideboard to the housemaid who was bringing in the breakfast.

The sound of a door closing below attracted her attention. Stepping to the window she saw her eldest son come up from the basement entrance and walk towards the garden gate. Her face darkened and she tapped vehemently on the glass. Dick looked back, and, in obedience to an imperative gesture, returned to the house, entering by the front door, which his mother opened for him.

"Where are you going at this early hour?" she asked him when they had reached the dining-room; "you will be at the office before the doors are open. Tell me what scheme is in your head?" she spoke sternly.

As Dick met her eyes a faint smile curled his lip, but he replied with quiet respect, "My scheme was to see an old schoolfellow who is in a builder's office, and I sometimes call to look over the plans he is working at."

"That is like your usual obstinacy! You have a better opening given you by Mr. Acland than you have any right to expect—a chance of lightening the burden you have been to me, and instead of devoting yourself to the profession in which you might win fortune, you waste your time hankering after stones and mortar, some rubbish of an ideal!"

"I do not waste my time," returned the young man with a sort of weary indifference; "I never shirk the office work; but I have a right to my time before and after hours; *that* does not take anything from Mr. Acland."

"It does; it fritters away your mental force. Concentration is the best road to success. I hate to see any trace of what your unfortunate father used to call 'versatility' in you; and you are strangely like as well as unlike him. I trust you will not bring misery upon me as *he* did."

Dick made no reply; but a grim look of displeasure gathered over his brow, and brought out a decided resemblance to his surviv-

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