

"Indeed. You are, I believe, the friend and guardian of a young lady who—to speak quite plainly—has made a conquest of my grandson."

"You have correctly defined my relationship to Miss Marcia Golding. But although I understand that Mr. Austin Vaughan has honoured my ward by the offer of his hand, and this, moreover, with your sanction, yet my errand is only partially and in the second place concerned with Marcia's matrimonial prospects. Will you try to brace yourself against what may be agitating news, Sir Owen? You had a daughter?"

The withered form visibly trembled. A passion of hopeless yearning broke into the sudden, stifled wail:

"Adeline! I doted on Adeline!"

But there was a quick change.

"What have you to tell me of my daughter?" the old man asked in imperious accents.

"Very little, Sir Owen, and at the same time very much. She married an old school and college comrade of mine, and—he has lost his wife. His name is Paul Calthorpe Golding. My ward Marcia is his child, and consequently your granddaughter."

It took a full hour before the truth and its many-sided import were thoroughly comprehended by the head of the house of Vaughan. But when John Mallison went back to Corner Cottage he felt that his mission had been a very blessed one. If the sharp prick of sorrow had—as was inevitable—accompanied the intimation of Mrs. Golding's de- cease, even this was better than the wearing grief of suspense. And all the old barriers of pride and resentment were broken down. Sir Owen was determined not merely to acknowledge Marcia, but also to seek a reconciliation with her father.

Austin was not to be seen when the interview had ended. No one knew where he had gone.

"Mr. Austin looked into the post-bag, which came maybe ten minutes ago, and then he walked away into the park," said the butler, of whom enquiries were made. John Mallison was indisposed to await the truant's return. Doubtless Marcia had sent him the momentous word which had resolved all his doubts, and he wished to be alone with his joy. On the whole it was just as well that the startling intelligence of the cousinship should be made known by Sir Owen himself to his grandson.

"Where is Marcia, mother?"

Something in the tone caused Mrs. Mallison to look up with an access of curiosity.

"In her room packing, I believe," she answered dryly.

"Packing!" he echoed incredulously.

It was his turn to experience a shock.

"Yes. Is that very unreasonable, John, when you have given her leave so readily to forsake you?"

"I don't understand. She wished it. I put the question. But how is this necessary? Packing! Why should she go elsewhere yet? She does not yet dream of the change the discovery will make, surely. Marcia is a mystery!"

"Say rather that my son is. Certainly I am quite as puzzled by your words as you are by mine. Oh, but I think I have it."

A singular smile lit up Mrs. Mallison's face.

"Then would you kindly explain?"

"It has been a game of cross-purposes. You supposed that Marcia referred to Mr. Austin Vaughan's proposal, as if any girl would come to you in the manner Marcia did if that was the burden on her mind. The idea is absurd! And you asked her if she was prepared to accept Mr. Vaughan in the event of obtaining your consent. You understood that her reply was in the affirmative. From beginning to end you were wrong. Marcia has sent to Austin Vaughan the same answer that she sent to Hugh Herrick."

"No!"

The exclamation was involuntary.

"The message she brought to you was from her father, and she was very much surprised because you seemed to know all about it. Paul Golding has returned to Cape Town, not, as I conjecture, having retrieved his fortunes by his mining adventures. He wrote a few hasty lines to catch the mail, suggesting that Marcia should rejoin him, going out by the earliest possible boat; and coldly, briefly, deliberately, you agreed, as if Marcia had indeed been the incubus she styles herself."

John Mallison's countenance changed and changed again as he listened. Relief—vivid as sunshine breaking from November clouds—wonder, chagrin, discontent, were each successively present at those points in the story which gave them warrant. Hurriedly he capped this revelation with his own narrative.

"Quite unwittingly Paul's wishes and directions have been set aside and rendered of no avail through my mistake," he said; "and the new chapter which has been opened must go on. Sir Owen Vaughan will not be content to let Marcia slip quietly away like the merest stranger whose advent or departure is no personal concern."

"I should think not."

"Marcia must be told."

"And then?"

"She must please herself, I suppose, about going or staying."

"If she does return at once to Cape Town shall you be pleased, John?"

There was a curious pause. Then John Mallison met his mother's eyes without flinching.

"It cannot be," he said slowly and hopelessly.

She understood his meaning as surely as he had interpreted here.

(To be continued.)

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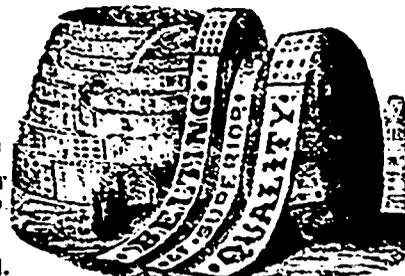
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