—THE—

Grand Alliance;

—OR,—

Love That Knew No Bounds.

CHAPTER XXII.

Over the road to that desirable end, she puzzled, till two upright puckers established themselves permanently between her brown eyebrows, and not till nearly Michaelmas did the faintest solution of the difficulty present itself. Then it was only of the stop-gap description, but, being better than none, she stifled qualms over it, and adopted the device which till now story-books only had made her acquainted with.

It happened that on one September afternoon a stranger to Hedyngham arrived there by rail, and going through the principal street, drew out his watch by the post office, to see if his and local time tallied. It was just five o'clock, a fact proclaimed additionally by an outrush from a building hard by of National schoolboys, one of whom, with a joyful yelp of freedom, backed on the traveler's elbow, jerked the watch on to a valise in the opposite hand, and smashed the crystal face to fragments. Before the owner understood the accident the originator had bolted, so nothing remained but to look up a shop where the damage might be repaired. Some score of yards off, gilt letters on a shop door blazoned forth that "W. D. Samuels" had for fifty years traded at that spot as goldsmith, optician, etc., and smaller type made known that old gold or silver could be there purchased or taken in exchange. Here the stranger then entered, and handed his watch over the counter for treatment, announcing that he would wait while a new glass was put in.

"That," said Mr. Samuels, screwing his trade badge into one sharp eye, and examining the dial carefully, wouldn't take me two minutes, sir; but I'm sorry to say the rim is injured. I can't put that right under a day. You—see, sir."

The gentleman did see, with considerable disgust. The injured chattel was an old favorite. The notion of trusting it to an unknown tradesman was unpalatable. He hesitated, mentally objurgating the little rascal who had caused him the annoyance, then made up his mind.

"I'll have it attended to in town," he said. "Just put it up in a box for me; and have you any silver concern—second-hand will do—that will keep time the few days I'm down here?"

Mr. Samuels's **amour propre,** ruffled at the first sentence, was soothed at the sceond. He had many of the articles requested in stock. Might he trouble the gentleman to step behind his desk? Here were fifty hanging up, extraordinarily reasonable, from which he could make choice. So round the tall rail-topped desk went the customer, and was there enduring Mr. Samuels's alternate eulogiums upon an ancient specimen of the turnip tribe and a superfine floriated back Geneva, when another individual entered the shop; and, with a muttered "Excuse, sir," Mr. Samuels returned to his counter.

The new-comer was a lady this time, and her business not to buy, but to sell. To Mr. Samuels's credit be it said, however, this in no way lessened his civility. On the contrary, he was politeness itself; but he spread courtesy as soft as down over a bargain as hard as adamant. No one could be sorrier than he that levers of this class had gone out of use, and reduced the watch, nervously submitted to him, to just the worth of the gold in its case. And no doubt it did seem strange to any one not in the trade that chains should drop to a quarter their first value after less than twenty years' wear; but that was the unfortunate truth. He hadn't made it, and he couldn't mend it, or, he was sure, to oblige Miss Dacie, he would. And these seals! Oh, out of date; only fit for melting! A spade guinea? Well, for her, he'd risk a sovereign on that. And a ring! Diamonds?" (The old dealer's eyes would have glistened if long habit had not made him careful.) "Why, it was sparkling, no doubt, and"—twisting it on the end of his thick thumb—"good; but the stones—oh, they were small, and the setting antiquated."

"It was a great-aunt's; she left it to me, and the watch too," poor Mary Dacie faltered. "We always thought them valuable."

"And they are," agreed ready Mr. Samuels; "very—valuable, indeed, from a-a-association; but as a matter of business I couldn't give more for the lot, Miss Dacie, than—"

Than about a third of what she had humbly hoped. Pained chagrin nearly unhinged her. But if she turned back from the half-completed ordeal, those wretched bills would gall her worse than ever. So she did her best to answer lightly, though all the shop looked blurred and misty for a minute.

"Then, if you can give me no more, Mr. Samuels, I suppose I can get no more. I have another watch at home" (a school-girl treasure, price forty shillings sixteen years before); "and I scarcely ever wear rings, so these are of little use for me. I must take what you offer. You did say guineas, did you not?"

Mr. Samuels had indeed, used that magnificent term, but he fully intended slipping through the transaction in five per cent. lowlier form. But there was an anxiety about the question that overrode his cupidity; also, he perceived that one of the seals was worth treble what he at first suspected. So with an air of generosity he conceded the odd shillings, unlocked his cash-box, paid out the sum, and, with the sincere assurance that he should be pleased to do similar business with her at any time, bowed Miss Dacie forth. Five minutes later he, with a deeper reverence, led out the stranger, who had emerged from behind the desk as soon as the lady left.

"It's an odd thing—very," said the old jeweller to himself, peeping after the gentleman as he strode off out-of-townward; "I don't know his face, nor his name, but I do know he's the right sort to deal with. Thirty per cent. with no waiting and no higgling, isn't to be sneezed at in these times!"

An hour after the episode Mr. Vaughan was roused from his coffee and the "Virgil" that served as scholarly sauce to his plain fare by an unexpected guest, and got up to welcome Richard Drayton right heartily.

"Dropped from the clouds!" he cried. "I'm glad enough to see you; but why this sudden appearance after months of never a line? Come—explain."

"Work, sir—work," said Mr. Drayton, giving up baggage and overcoat to the rectory housekeeper, and taking the seat and coffee his host pushed toward him. "I think I may boast I've not passed a lazy day since I left you twelve months ago."

"So! That sounds well. But"—when they were alone—"what has come of your labor? A certain person got out of my sight once for nigh twelve years, and came back no better off than when he set out. Eh?"

"True, sir, so far as cash goes; and I've not much more to show for my industry this time."

"Ah!" The rector looked disappointed. He knew his old pupil worthy, and would fain see him a successful man.

"But, unless I'm much mistaken, I shall have before long. I used to get chaffed abroad by men cleverer than myself for missing opportunities of fortune by waiting too long to make sure of my way; and the habit sticks, I suppose. I must make sure of good foundations before I set to building."

"Well, then, let me hear about your foundations, Drayton;" on which invitation the younger man discussed with his old tutor the particular paths which had opened out since they met, seeming to disclose, at no great distance of time, means of property in comparison with which his inherited income was a mere bagatelle.

"So far for what is accomplished," he said, at the end of explanations, carefully followed by his host. "Now for what is to come. Perhaps, sir, you will think it a bit romantic when I say I want to see that favorite Miss Alwyn of yours before I go any further."

In a moment the rector's interested countenance grew troubled. How success and sorrow mixed themselves up in this life, to be sure!

"My dear fellow," he said, in tones of vexation, "I'm afraid I have bad news for you there. Miss Alwyn has left St. Clair's these three months."

"Left! just when I wanted to tell—when I wanted her to say—Now, by all that's unlucky, how I wish I had come earlier. Once more I've been too slow. But I can follow her wherever she is, for of course you know, sir?"

"No more than you do."

Then, careful to avoid watching the signs of extreme disappointment on his hearer's face, the rector, as far as he felt at liberty, told of Sydney's good-bye to him, and the subsequent vacating of The Dale, finishing with,

"So I fear, Drayton, here is a block in the good luck which you had not calculated on."

"But one that must be got over," said the other, resolutely.

"Can you tell me, sir, where the Alwyns came from to St. Clair's?. I might get their present whereabouts so."

"I have not the slightest idea. I never heard their former home named."

"Nor anything of their former life? Mr. Alwyn's profession or so forth?"

"Nothing whatever. It has struck me sometimes it was a subject purposely avoided."

Mr. Drayton crumpled up his brows, and for a moment thought intently. Then he asked,

"And you've no clew to what took Miss Sydney away?"

"Not the least. I only surmise, from the poor child's emotion, it was something delicate and painful. As she could not disclose it, I have no right to pry into it. Though as for you—you haven't said in so many words why you want to see her, but, my dear Dick—"

"But I must find her somehow," broke in Mr. Dick, abruptly. "If you can't set me on my way, sir, I suppose no one at St. Clair's can?"

"No one, unless Miss Dacie has heard of her since we last met."

"Ah, I could ask her, couldn't I?" said Mr. Drayton, with great alacrity. "Mightn't I go to-night?"

"At a quarter to ten! Nay, that's past canonical calling-hours in the country. Wait till the morning."

So till the morning Mr. Drayton was fain to curb his impatience, rewarding resolution by starting for the Gate House at nine o'clock, next day.

Mary was working diligently in the garden, her conscience a little lighter for the thought of three receipted bills in her desk. She heard a step, looked up, saw who came, and had no time to flee into the house and hide a preposterous attack of shyness and her much-faded cotton gown before he was by her side.

In trepidation worthy of a lass in her teens, she got her hand out of its huge leather glove and offered a disjointed greeting, enraged at her own awkwardness, though, as a matter of fact, with the sunshine on her yellow brown hair and a rising color in her cheeks, she looked younger than she had done for many a day, and, spite of the washed-out print, a gentlewoman comely and graceful still.

(To be Continued.)

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