

gentler eye. The limpid eyes were wistful, but the pale face under that preposterous, poisoning butterfly was hard and strained. Under her pert manner and her absurd dress his keen perceptions divined a spirit in straits, but the situation was developing too fast, and from the side from which danger was most to be dreaded. If Lesley, in her own impulsive generosity, had forged a dart for her own bosom, she would carry her wound with a high head and a still face, and so would Adrian. They were Skenes, both of them, but who knew what this undisciplined young creature might do?

"My dear young lady," he said, "what we've got to concern ourselves with in this world is—what is; I don't believe much in might have beens. That at the time so and so didn't happen is usually pretty plain proof that it couldn't have happened, whatever we may fancy afterwards, and I wonder"—smiling—"who has better reason than yourself to know why Adrian's courage did hold out. As for my poor old friend, he had a sad life of it, and the idea had become to him like a sick man's fancy. At the last there was neither rhyme nor reason in it."

"But you said that at the last he seemed to be thinking more kindly of Adrian, and not for the first time—so at least I have been told," said Alys, passing from the personal note, which relieved though it did not altogether reassure her hearer.

"I did say so, and I believe it's true, if it's any pleasure to Adrian to know that the grudge wasn't carried to the grave, but it's ill for a man like Richard Skene to go back on his word. If he had had more time, who knows—but"—shaking his head—"here again it's a case of 'what is.'"

"But you don't suppose that he might have perhaps put down his wishes—written something—but, since he was such a proud man, not have cared to tell anyone?" suggested Alys.

Mr. Dalmahoy laughed indulgently.

"No, no; these are the things that happen in story-books, though there was nothing to hinder him doing it, for in Scots law if a man writes his will in his own hand and signs it, he doesn't need witnesses, but 'every man his own lawyer' is as dangerous as 'every man his own doctor,' and more so, maybe, for the mischief spreads further. If there had been anything of the kind, we should have found it long before now, and no one would be more pleased than I, unless Miss Lesley," looking down the long, shining table to his young hostess.

Alys's eyes followed his, and her mouth set hard again, but at that moment Lesley rose. As Alys rose to follow her, she hurriedly whispered to Mr. Dalmahoy:

"I know you think I shouldn't have been asking all these questions, but, do believe me, it is Adrian I am thinking of. He is wasted here—I see it now." She was the pleading *ingenue* again, but there was the unmistakable ring of truth and passion in the last stifled words about Adrian.

In the drawing-room Alys deliberately withdrew to a distant chair, but Mrs. Campbell, to whose motherly eye the girl looked somewhat forlorn and lonely, followed her, and, thinking it the best entertainment she could offer a young wife, began regaling her with tales of Adrian and his early days.

"He was left so much alone as a child, poor dear, that we were quite glad when poor Mrs. Home died, and little Lesley was brought here," rambled on the good soul, and then caught herself up in sudden distress. "Of course, I don't mean that we were glad that dear Mrs. Home died, for it was so very sad and she so young, poor thing. The ways of Providence are very mysterious, but since it had to be, it was very nice for Adrian, poor boy, to have Lesley here."

"Oh, yes, I quite understand. I don't know much about Providence, except that it always seems to need an apologist," broke in Alys, impatiently. "I have no doubt it must have been very nice for Adrian. I suppose he and his cousin were always together. Do tell me more, a man is never inclined to talk about such things," she added coaxingly, while Mrs. Campbell sat in flustered silence, not quite certain whether she shouldn't be shocked or not by Mrs. Adrian's daring allusion, and inclining again to her first conclusion that with such a dress and a head like a haystack the girl must be rather "a trial" to her friends at Stode.

But the invitation "to tell more" was one which she never could resist, and since Mrs. Adrian came from London, that vague and mysterious Babylon, these might be the fashions there, so she took up her artless tale with zest again, and ambled amiably and unconsciously on. Alys, leaning back with the averted face, gripped the arms of her chair, till the knuckles stood out white, as the good-hearted gossip brought her tale of a boy and girl friendship down to its last phase.

"I don't wonder that poor Mr. Skene was so keen on the wedding, it seemed such an ideal

arrangement. Adrian is a good few years older than dear Lesley, and I daresay she seemed too young at the time, but we always hoped it would come about sooner or later. Lesley needn't have been Miss Home for these five years unless she had chosen, and there's Sir Neil, it's plain enough what he wants, so one couldn't help drawing one's own conclusions; but of course, my dear," in sudden confused recollection, "that was before we knew anything about you. Of course, we couldn't be expected to know"—smiling—"but when we did hear—"

"You thought that the ways of Providence were very mysterious," Alys cut sharply through the would-be explanation, and sprang out of her chair with a sudden swiftness which set the long antennae and the spreading wings of her butterfly a-quivering.

## CHAPTER IX.

"Adrian," said Lesley one morning at breakfast a week or two later, "Mrs. Burnett was arranging some things in Uncle Richard's room, and I was with her, and made rather an odd find. There are a lot of letters in one or two drawers in that big old bureau in the turret room. They were under some clothes, which I thought should be given away. I never knew that Uncle Richard kept any papers there. I suppose Mr. Dalmahoy must have looked over them and decided that they were of no importance, but I wish you would go over them with me, for if they are only letters, as they seem to be, they ought perhaps to be destroyed."

"Of course I shall," said Adrian. "When should you like to do it—to-day?"

"No, there is no special hurry, and I suppose you have your plans made for to-day. But there are the keys, if you will keep them meantime," laying a little bunch on the table. "It would be a shame to waste a morning like this. If you are going to Craigs, why not drive, and Alys could go with you."

She turned with a smile to Alys, who was reading a letter with an air of extreme detachment and aloofness.

"I don't know Adrian's plans, but I don't care to go out to-day, it is too cold," said Alys indifferently.

If her husband had to be prompted to remember her pleasure, then she would go without.

"Cold?" echoed Lesley. "Oh, surely not, if you had plenty of wraps—it is so bright," glancing out.

The long range of windows showed a transformed world. The first snow had fallen, and against a pale blue sky, infinitely pure and rare, the high moors spread their sheen of virgin white, every fold and slope and corrie where a shadow lay traced in violet or deepest indigo. In the valley there was but a thin sprinkling of snow, enough to strike the sombre pine trees to a brighter green, and to enhance the countless tender tints of a winter woodland in the glancing morning sun.

"I wish you would come, Alys," urged Adrian. "The air is like wine. It would do you all the good in the world."

"I wish you good people would remember that tastes differ," said Alys pettishly. "I don't like my wine iced. Besides, if I don't go, you needn't bother with the cart. Since it is such a fine day, why not ride?" with a quick flashing look from Lesley to Adrian, her eyes keen to catch any fleeting change of expression.

"The roads are too hard," said Adrian quietly, slipping the keys into his pocket and beginning to gather up his letters.

Lesley took no notice of the suggestion, as though it in no way included her. Those rambling rides, since she had remarked upon them one evening, had come to an end, Alys had been quick to notice, but she was none the happier for that. Jealousy, like those plants the roots of which draw their nourishment from the air, can feed fat upon the veriest nothings.

Left alone, Alys sat for a time gazing out upon the sparkling snowy world. Her face was set in hard and bitter lines. It would have been delightful to have had Adrian all to herself for an hour or two, to have been whirled along close by his side through the clear, diamond-bright morning, but it was not only foolish pique which had made her condemn herself to another solitary forenoon. A sudden wild idea had clutched her when Lesley spoke of these newly-found papers and laid the keys on the table. Her fingers had itched to snatch up the little shining bunch. It was just possible that Mr. Dalmahoy had not known of them. What if there might be something among them—some codicil to that hateful will, she had heard of such things, and Adrian was so absurdly quixotic that if his cousin's interests were at stake, he might be capable of any foolishness. Oh, if only she had those keys!

Suddenly she rose, dropped the knife with which she had been absently tracing patterns on the cloth, and, to the relief of the footman in the background, silently waiting her pleasure, she hurried from the room. She darted up to the state bedroom which had once seemed so oppressively vast and splendid to her, and passed on to Adrian's dressing-room. She paused, almost startled by finding that one part of her expectations was fulfilled; Adrian had changed his coat before going out, and the one he had been wearing at breakfast was thrown down upon a chair. She slid her hand into the pocket—yes, drawing a quick breath, the keys were there!

As her hand closed upon them a flush dyed her face. The keys were there simply because Adrian thought them quite safe, because he would never dream that anyone, that she least of all, would do what he would deem so mean a thing. For a moment Alys paused, her hand still in the depth of the pocket; then she withdrew it with a jerk. After all, with a stubborn setting of the mouth, it was for Adrian's sake, and she was doing no wrong. Where could be the harm of turning over a few old papers? Who would be the worse, and—most powerful plea of all—who would know? Lady Marchmont never appeared till lunch. Miss Home was out. Adrian would not likely return for hours. She must risk encountering any of the servants on her way to Mr. Skene's rooms, which she knew were in the old part of the house.

Presently, with a beating heart, Alys found herself in the narrow passage outside the heavy door. Cautiously she tried the door, with a sudden fear of finding it locked, but the handle turned, the door opened, and she stepped swiftly in, closing it silently behind her. For a breath's length she dare not lift her eyes, while the cold air of the unsunned, unused room struck through her like the very chill of death. Too self-absorbed to be very imaginative, she yet felt, as the door closed behind her, as if she were violating a sanctuary. By instinct she knew that nothing had been changed, that all was still as the dead man had left it. Left it? To her it seemed that his presence still pervaded the gloomy room, and that at any moment her quick, scared glances might meet the gaze of those steely eyes which looked out so coldly from the portrait downstairs.

At last she took hold of her vanishing courage. She must not be caught prying here, and she slipped the key from the outside to the inside of the door, turned it hastily, and looked round her for the "big old bureau." The light was dim, for the blinds were closely drawn over the narrow windows, set deep in the thick walls. At first she could only discern the outlines of the big, canopied, heavily-draped bed, and of the solid, old-fashioned, rose-wood furniture, so dark as to seem black in the grey light. There were no ornaments and hardly a superfluous article, and the only picture was a slight, faded, crayon sketch of a fair, girlish face.

But Alys had no eyes for such details. Keys in hand, she passed from the bedroom to the dressing-room, and thence into a quaint little circular room formed by a flanking tourette. It contained only a single chair and a tall bureau. With a sigh of relief she thrust in a key at random. Here she seemed more free from that indefinable oppression which had haunted her since she had locked the door between herself and the living world.

Luck favoured her, the key turned, the drawer opened, and showed a quantity of dusty, yellowing papers, and yet before she plunged her hands among them she cast a terrified glance over her shoulder at the half-open door behind her. Then, with a would-be laugh at her folly, she turned the papers over with swift, deft hands. Some were neatly tied up in bundles and duly docketed with the precise neatness characteristic of Richard Skene, others were huddled in as if the dead man had wearied of the task and left it for another day.

In a more ordinary mood Alys might have been tempted to investigate more closely, or to read some of the fading lines, but in her panic haste she had no time for that, and little thought for the tragedy of life and death which lies folded up in old letters. If what she sought was here at all it would be something fresher, more recent than these musty memorials, but in this drawer there was nothing of the kind, and with a sigh she closed it and tried another. Empty save for a few trifles, and in her disappointment she shut it with a snap, which, to her ears, reverberated through the dead stillness like a thunder-clap. It must rouse the house, she thought, starting to her feet for instant flight, but, though the heavy air seemed to vibrate with the dying echoes, no sound from without broke the silence, and, setting her teeth, she sat down again and opened another drawer.

(To be continued)