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WHOLE NO. 503.

Christmas Story.

"Ceres: Miss Flossie Burgoyne."
(By Miss Braddon)
CHAPTER I.
(Continued.)

The idea of passing what is called a domestic evening in the family circle had always seemed to me the some of dulness, but I never tired of evenings at 58. My chair was always ready for me; there was always a kind smile from Mrs. Lydney, and a smile more than kind from her daughter.

And so the time passed on, so pleasantly that it was some time before I broke through my dreamy happiness to look my position in the face, and when I did so it was rather a difficult one. I could not doubt that Flossie's heart was mine, and I was bound in honor to say nothing of inclination—to speak plainly. That my friends would approve of my choice I knew was unlikely—was quite out of question; they did not know her nature or her goodness, and could only look on her as one of a class which is so much contemned, for in their opposition they would accept only the "burlesque actress" view of the question—it was human nature to do so. I was not a "catch," except in so far as connections were concerned. I had rather less than £200 a year of my own, and an uncle—from whom I had vague expectations had always allowed me another £200; which I had come to look on as my own property. I had been expecting that some of my friends would get me an appointment of some sort, and it would require very careful and skillful management to induce them to receive Flossie, and give me their aid. I had also trusted a good deal to a prudent marriage to improve my prospects.

Would it not be better to give up an affair which only promised opposition from relatives, coldness from friends, and the loss of one of the means of making a position which I had placed reliance on? It would be pain to both at first, but we would soon recover. No. Thank God truth and honor prevailed, and they have brought their reward!

The road to Chiselhurst Street was very familiar by this time, and I shall never forget that April evening which decided my life.

I found her sitting in the little room, sitting on the low chair by the fire. The light shone on her dress, and three gleams on her hair as the tiny flames flickered on, and I could only see her eye indistinctly as I told my tale of love. She looked me from the first; and her mother was very fond of me too. She had hardly dared to hope for this—but she was too happy to speak, and the touch of her soft hand, and the first long fervent kiss, were rewards for which I would have given up all else on earth.

I told her mother of my position, my income, my willingness to give up my title and work, if my uncle, who, I expected, would do much for me, should disappoint me (I had little doubt on the subject, but did not wish to give too strong a tint to my picture, knowing the very uncertain nature of "expectations").

Money Mrs. Lydney did not care for. She only wanted to see Flossie married to a gentleman. She knew that Flossie loved me, and all that she feared was my heart. Was I quite sure that I knew my own mind? Flossie was so unlike other girls that followed public professions, so gentle and loving—and if I turned from her it would kill her. Was I sure?

I answered very earnestly—for I spoke from the bottom of my heart—and then she gave me her daughter.

CHAPTER II.

That Flossie's father had been a gentleman, one look at her was sufficient to prove, but he had been dead some years; and besides two aunts—who, after all, were not aunts, but her father's cousins—she had very few relations.

satisfied you. She wore a selection of jewelry which would have stocked a stall in the Lower Arcade—from whence, indeed, most of it had originally come. I was going to say "jewelry of doubtful quality," but there was no doubt about it. Her aim and object was "society," and for many years she had been seeking for the door; but whether her remarkably bulky person rendered her ingress difficult, or whether it had been discovered that distance lent an enchantment to the view of her which a nearer inspection dispelled, certain it was that society "didn't see it," and wouldn't see her. Between them they thoroughly managed Mrs. Lydney, who, being a good-hearted, simple-minded woman, and suspecting no evil, had little chance with them.

They had strongly disapproved of Flossie's adoption of a public life, and very cold had been their treatment of the poor little girl in days gone by; indeed, few people knew that there was any relationship between them. Money, however, was necessary to the Lydenys to give young Lydney a start in life, and to pay some law charges which his mother had foolishly incurred, or been led into incurring; and so, after much opposition, Flossie had been allowed to adopt a life which she much disliked, but was anxious to try, wishing to do all she could to assist those dear to her. She had sung a little in the country, and had been engaged to appear in London at a "tempting salary" for what she thought was to be opera—a life which she would have to sing a couple of songs and do little else; but it was so hard to say when operetta ends and opera bouffe begins, and operetta was very nearly allied to burlesque. Concert engagements had been so very difficult to obtain, and so she had come to London and had played, as I had seen.

But now she was beginning to make a good success, and a new idea occurred to the aunts. Why should she not marry? Surely such a girl ought to make a good match; and, hanging on to the skirts of the once-despised niece, Mrs. Eastby could sneak into better society than she had hitherto enjoyed.

My position was good enough to answer the purpose; for they had heard of my uncle's wealth, of the Manor—his place in Suffolk—and all he had to leave, and they supposed some of it would come to me; and if things went for my aunt, they would make it their business to have one or two other candidates ready.

I was singing a duet with Flossie one afternoon when the servant announced these two ladies—much to my annoyance, for I had been away from home for some time, and wanted to have Flossie all to myself.

Their photographs had done them perfect justice.

"You have indeed secured a treasure in Florence," said Miss Parsons, when the little girl had left the room to get ready for tea.

"I don't often come up here," he replied, "but I have been to Blakey's studio. He's doing a very good thing for the Academy. He says she's living up here because it's so light." No one thinks the worse of a man for being poor, but every one does for his being a beggar; and, in the families that man tells about the price he gets for his pictures would stump a shop. You've been to 58, I presume?

"Not at all. You may remember that in the course of Hamlet's rather outspoken conversation with the fair Ophelia, he informed her that if she were as pure as snow and chaste as ice, she would not escape calumny. Now, Ophelia was probably a very well-brought-up young woman, and not addicted to risky company—though her father was certainly a shocking old donkey—and if a girl at the Prince's escapes, she must be a paragon."

"Oh yes, I wanted to tell you. I know those old women; I've met them at a place I go to call at sometimes at Clapham; but I only found out the other day they were Miss Lydney's aunts. Don't approve of the profession, don't they? Bless them! Nice old girl the maiden—maiden!—Heaven save the mark! She is secretary to a kind of female philanthropical society; and, as I hear, doesn't make a bad thing of it. She has solved the rather difficult problem of how to live up to £700 a year on £150. I should be sorry to say that the philanthropical subscribers supply the balance, and that she gets it unfairly; but I should be more sorry to say that she doesn't. Queen complexion she has! I could not help thinking, the other day, what a useful wife she would make to a fellow who sketched. Her nose is just like India-rubber; I'm certain it would rub out pencil-marks. Did you hit it? I don't mean the nose, but did you agree with her?"

"I can't say I like her. She can't talk much. How about Mrs. Eastby? she seems a great wail; it's all my lady this, and the dear countess."

"Oh yes, she's been in the best society."

"That's her lookout. You know Belmont House, in Staffordshire? She lived there once."

"As mistress?"

"No—as maid, to Lady Belmont. She married a tradesman in the neighborhood," Charlie continued; "she always calls him the 'colonel'—don't know why—and is—or thinks she is—an extremely aristocratic personage."

"What a fellow does not marry his wife's aunts," I said. "I'm awfully glad you approve of my choice. You don't know how fond I am of that little girl. I should break my heart if anything were to happen to separate us."

"I do not know whether such a proceeding is anatomically possible; but I can't understand how it comes about that sensible fellows are ever out on top affairs. It seems to me that all love affairs come under one of three heads, and in either of the cases, a fellow ought not to do so. You ask a girl to marry you, and she says she will. Surely that ought to satisfy you? Or you ask her to marry you, and she says she won't; in which case it's no use making yourself unhappy. Or, in the third place, you ask her to marry you, and she says she will—and doesn't; and a girl who could—what is the poetical expression?—break her plighted troth, isn't worth being out about. How's your uncle?"

"Not at all. You may remember that in the course of Hamlet's rather outspoken conversation with the fair Ophelia, he informed her that if she were as pure as snow and chaste as ice, she would not escape calumny. Now, Ophelia was probably a very well-brought-up young woman, and not addicted to risky company—though her father was certainly a shocking old donkey—and if a girl at the Prince's escapes, she must be a paragon."

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