

SISTERS THREE

(Continued from Wednesday.)

"It was like this, Jim is Irish—money slips through his fingers. He is not extravagant in his tastes, but he is a favorite everywhere, and that costs money. I suppose he was a bit short. He knows I do not like debts. So far as can be made out, he was trying hard to get money from every source that he could. He came down here. He sold a few colts—a few pups. It was Lebreton—Gaston's father—who wanted a yard dog, and made an offer for a fine young mastiff pup. Jim wanted six pounds, but Lebreton was always close-fisted, and would only give four. But Jim apparently was pressed, and the bargain which wrecked him."

"How?"

"It was drawn to order, but was not crossed. Jim had asked that, it seemed. Lebreton banked in London. He was a very wealthy man. Some young man presented the cheque at the bank in the dusk of a murky afternoon. The cheque, as presented, had been drawn for four hundred pounds, and the clerk cashed it without suspicion. It looked perfectly right."

"And what had happened?"

"I have not seen the cheque; but of course my lawyer had it examined with the utmost care and by experts. It seems plain that Mr. Lebreton had used a stylograph pen in writing it. Towards the end of his life his eyesight was defective, and he was very sensitive about this. It was evident upon close investigation under strong magnifiers that after he had written the word 'Four' the pen had failed to write when he thought he was putting down the word 'pounds' immediately after. Then, when it came to the figures—they were set closely together, and a little clever manipulation served easily to turn four pounds into four hundred pounds. The pen had not made the stops at all clearly, and in the place above only the word 'four' had been written. A clever writer with a little dexterous practice could easily, as you see, change this cheque from four into four hundred pounds."

"A few weeks sped by; then the blow fell. The hard part to me is that Lebreton did not hold his hand, did not communicate with me, acted the part of an enemy, when we had been at least acquaintances of long standing, and neighbors, even if we had never been cordial friends. Our wives had been friends; our boys had played together. It was not the act of a just or good-hearted man to spring like a tiger on his prey and have the lad arrested and tried without the chance of his getting together the money and making good the loss."

"He did that? Oh!"

"He did just that! I know that there had been friction between us latterly. He had ideas concerning some of the fisher-folk and laborers on the land which I had sought to modify and combat. That, I suppose, was in part the cause of his action, and in part his rooted love of money which was growing upon him steadily. Though very rich, he

was niggardly and mean. So that this loss touched him in a tender spot; and when my boy was at his mercy it was no mercy that he received."

"But he did not do it!"

"Heaven be thanked, I am sure of that! But he was held responsible. There was his signature on the back. Some tall, upright young fellow had cashed it at the bank. The clerk would not swear that it was Jim—the light had been too bad—but he said it might have been him. It was a man who looked like a soldier-chap—which my Jim had done from boyhood. The 'soldier-chap' had worn a cape—it was raining hard—the collar turned up. That went against him too. And when my lawyer pressed him to say what he had done with this particular cheque he could not get anything satisfactory out of him. Jim, it seems, had been settling up a good many small debts and accounts with a good many tradespeople and friends, and he would not commit himself to any statement as to the destination of that particular cheque."

"In case he might make a mistake?"

"The girl was breathless with interest; her lips were parted, her eyes aglow.

"It might have been that, my dear, I cannot tell. I can only tell you the fact. No persuasions or appeals could make him say what he had done with Lebreton's cheque. It might, as he said, have passed through many hands before it reached the bank. It was his own carelessness which was to blame. He ought to have seen that the word 'pounds' was lacking after the word 'four.' If he had put temptation in another chap's way by his own carelessness—my boy was always careful—then the fault in him his mother had never succeeded in eradicating; and, Heaven forgive me, I think I never sufficiently did my duty in trying to help him myself! Be that as it may, he would not have any one else suffer for it."

"Oh, he was noble—noble! I think he must have been very like you!"

"The naïveté of this remark drew a smile from the old General, which presently faded as he took up his tale."

"And so they tried him—sent him to a convict prison for five long years. Three years of that have run. And I am getting an old, old man. It is hard to live when the motive power seems gone. Jim was my all. If he had fallen in the war—that war he would surely have gone out to fight."

"Ah, don't say that, don't think it."

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for he will come back to you one day!"

"But how? With the brand of prison upon him!"

"Do not call it that! How many of the noblest men in history have suffered cruel imprisonment! Think of St. Paul and the saints of old! Were they snatched or sold by what they suffered? Ah, don't think of it like that! It is only sin that stains. And he is innocent; we are sure of that!"

"You are sure, my child?"

"Oh, quite sure! Your son—your soldier-boy!"

"Thank you, my dear! You have done me good. Perhaps you will indeed prove that help that comes out of the east."

"Ah, if only I could be anything like that—if only I could!" She clasped her hands together and turned her face, earnest with thought and feeling, towards him. "Is there nobody—no friend of his—no comrade of those days—who could tell you anything that would help?"

"There was one friend of his who I thought perhaps might have known something, for they were much together, and, though he was several years older, Jim always spoke of him as his chief chum." But he went off to South Africa just at that time, and soon we learned that he had been shot through the heart by a Boer bullet. He never came home. What was his name?"

"Willoughby—Captain Willoughby of the—"

Allardyce clasped her hands together. Her face grew a little pale, and her eyes took a strange shining. Over and over again her lips repeated the name's words.

"Willoughby—Captain Willoughby."

Chapter XIII.

When Audrey returned the call of Madame Lebreton she went alone, and was not entirely sorry that neither of her sisters felt disposed to accompany her.

Gipsy openly repudiated having anything to say to Gaston's Keep or its inhabitants, though she was ready to admit that Audrey, as the eldest sister, had a right to judge for herself and to take up the social burdens incident to her position of chief lady at Sunset Crag.

Allardyce said very little about it, but she had never begun to pay calls. In the old home-life she had been too young, and in London they had other things to do than make social ties. On the afternoon that Audrey paid her visit Allardyce had promised to take her violin and play to General Kildare.

"I don't want to be unkind to Mrs. Lebreton," she said. "I know that it had nothing to do with her, that terrible thing her husband did; but somehow I don't feel as though I wanted to go near Gaston's Keep. I do not like the name of Lebreton. It sounds to me harsh and cruel—almost wicked!"

Audrey smiled. That was so like Allardyce. From a child she had been very sensitive to the name of that name had colors and that some of these colors hurt her in some way. Names came to her charged with shades of significance quite incomprehensible to others.

So the eldest sister went on her way alone on this brilliant afternoon of early May. There was a glow in the air that was almost like that of summer, though the nip in the wind gave reminder that the caprices of springtide were not yet over. Audrey felt the exhilaration of the season and the interest of her errand. The mistress of Gaston's Keep was to her one of the most interesting personalities she had ever encountered. He life held hidden tragedy—not the garish tragedy of which the sensational press takes cognizance when it gets the chance, but that silently-borne, long-drawn-out life tragedy of the woman who has married the wrong man—the man she fails to influence—the man whose helpmeet and counterpart she can never become, so that her life consists in witnessing courses of action she cannot approve, yet is debarred by wisely loyalty from openly condemning, and in watching the slow alienation of those to whom in happier circumstances she would have been more closely drawn.

Audrey's clear young eyes had already noted the isolation of Madame Lebreton's life. She was scarcely ever invited to the small social gatherings in the neighborhood, for the reason that there were many persons in the district who had more or less cause to dislike meeting with any one of that name.

To be sure her recent widowhood had made for this isolation during the past two years, and it would have been thought out of taste to press invitations upon her. But Audrey very well knew that there was more than this. She had met Mrs. Lebreton once at the Rectory, when they two were the only guests, and again she had felt that her interest was stirred beyond its wont, and that this lonely woman with the quiet manner, the gentle dignity of sorrow, and the face where so many slumbering expressions found a home was worth an effort to get in touch with. Also Audrey felt some instinctive assurance that any effort she might make in this direction would neither be misinterpreted nor repudiated. The friendship with a woman so much older than herself was to this girl possessed of many and great attractions.

Further, she was interested in the fine old house itself. From various places she had looked down upon it or up towards it. She was familiar with the grim bulk of the ancient keep, draped in ivy and dominating all the rest of the surrounding buildings. She had had glimpses of extensive and romantic-looking ruins, of a fine house of somewhat dilapidated aspect situated at a short distance from these. There were surrounding gardens which began to show splashes of color from flowering shrub or springtide bedding. She would like to see all these things for herself at closer quarters, and was now in the way to do it.

Down the carriage road she took



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her way with first the bay and then the stream upon her left. But where the road forked and the right-hand branch led to church, village, and post-office, the left-hand branch led to the wide stone bridge which picturesquely spanned the stream and then immediately forked again. The straight on road led to the gates of Gaston's Keep, while the narrower way led down to the shore and onwards thence to the black reef where the Kildares had their castle. The great wrought iron gates

swung open to admit Audrey, and she found herself in a pile of green glades, laughing streamlets, fine timber, and in one place a long inlet from the sea which was spanned by a suspension bridge of modern construction and of great elegance of form. It was altogether a romantic-looking place, where water-fowl brooded over a wide mere and deer browsed in the green glades. In this warm and sheltered spot the trees were beginning to shake out little crumpled leaflets of vivid green, and a lacquer of dancing shadow was flung over the emerald of the

grass. Here and there splendid masses of rhododendron were bursting into bloom, and the glory of crimson, scarlet, pink and gold made a checker work amid the solemn darkness of ilex or pine.

"What a splendid place!" thought Audrey as she pursued her way. "How Gipsy would love galloping in these long green glades and watching the birds and beasts of this silent place!"

And Audrey found herself building castles in the air in which her favorite sister played the part of heroine and chatelaine; and before

she had done with this erection she found herself at an inner gate opening upon a wide sweep of golden gravel upon which stood the great portico before the entrance door. Madame was at home, Audrey learned, and she was conducted through a splendid baronial hall and down a wide carpeted corridor into a sunny south room, of noble proportions, which appeared to be less the drawing-room of the house than the private apartment of a mistress. And here Audrey found herself quietly yet cordially welcomed by Mrs. Lebreton.

(To be Continued)

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