

she sat down at once and wrote a letter to Mr. Huxtable, the solicitor, explaining her position, and begging him to remove Sir Damer's son as quickly as possible.

Her heart ached for the motherless boy who was ill in a strange land, and she longed to be kind to him; but already Peter's meals had made such an inroad in the week's housekeeping money, that both she and Jennifer were in dismay.

It was a relief—and yet a painful one too—when she came downstairs, on the following evening, from putting her little sisters to bed, and found a gentleman waiting to see her.

"Miss Lansford, I believe?" he said, advancing to meet her. "I was not aware, till five minutes since, that a sad bereavement had occurred to you."

"My poor father? Yes. If he were still with us, the son of his friend would have been cordially received; but, as I explained in my letter, circumstances render it impossible for me to keep the poor boy here."

"Quite impossible," her visitor assented. "But excuse me, Miss Lansford, if my questions sound impertinent, have you no relative or friend residing with you?"

"I have Jennifer, our old servant. She is such a good, faithful creature, and insists on serving us without wages."

"Then it is as I feared; Mr. Lansford's property has been swept away in one of the commercial crashes. But you are not quite without means, surely?"

To a lawyer—even though this gentleman was a very young one, with none of the dry, inflexible manner supposed to be patent to his profession—Vera felt that reticence was impossible, so she answered him candidly:

"I have eighty pounds a year; and the house is our own."

"And you propose to support yourself, servant, and a family of children upon that sum?" he exclaimed, with uplifted eyebrows.

Oh, no; I am aware that it would be impossible. Our rector is endeavouring to obtain presentations to public schools for Lance and Leo, and I hope to get a few little girls to educate with my sisters. We might, perhaps, live more cheaply in the country; but I have not courage to forsake our old home yet."

"It is not to be thought of. If Sir Damer had known how the daughter of his old friend is situated, I am sure he would have empowered me—"

"Pray say no more," interposed Vera, flushing with pain and shame. "I should not have been so very frank with you if I had not feared that my anxiety to get rid of Sir Damer's son might be misinterpreted. Do you think he will be well enough to go away to-morrow?"

"To-night," was the decided reply. "I will make arrangements at once."

But Vera arrested the hand that was raised to the bell.

"Ah! no, not so hastily as that. The poor boy is weak and ill; let him rest till the morning. Then, unkind though it sounds, I shall only be too thankful for him to leave us."

"May I ask why? I hope Peter has not annoyed you?"

Vera smiled.

"Oh, no; the children will miss him sadly; but, judging by his account, young Wharton would be a dangerous acquaintance for my brothers. A daring, reckless lad, who has been allowed to shoot, ride, and hunt, might infect them with his own tastes, and then what should I do with them?"

Her auditor smiled, too, at the gravity with which this was said.

"I think I can promise that Laurie Wharton will do nothing to add to your anxieties, my dear Miss Lansford."

"Do you know him at all? Peter tells me that his illness is caused by a rash attempt to kill a venomous reptile."

"Peter might have added, that if the attempt had not been made, Sir Damer, on whose breast the cobra had coiled while he lay sleeping, might have lost his life."

Vera's eyes glistened through tears.

"Then he is a brave boy! I should like to know him after all."

"Don't think better of him than he deserves," was the laughing reply.

"When I do myself the honour of calling upon you again, I will, with your permission, bring Laurie Wharton with me."

He bowed over the hand Vera held out, as she softly thanked him for coming so promptly to her assistance, and vanished.

With equal promptitude, and after a very brief conference with Peter Johns, the big trunks were hauled downstairs again, a cab rattled away with them and their owner, and Vera, running into the kitchen to be congratulated on getting rid of her guests, found Jennifer exceedingly glum.

"Intest and intest, the house would be as dull as ditch-water without Peter! He was the hantiest man that had ever come in her way, and could read his Bible most beautifully. It was a treat to sit and listen to him."

Peter must have been equally struck with the good qualities of Jennifer, for in the course of the day a porter left a parcel addressed to her, containing a couple of print gowns (her favourite colours), and a plaid shawl, so thick, soft and warm that it threw her into ecstasies.

Nor was this the only present that arrived from Peter Johns; it was followed by a set of doll's china for Daisy, a waxen baby for Violet almost too beautiful to touch, a bag for Leo containing a bat, ball, and stumps, and just the microscope for Lance he had been longing to possess.

How could Sir Damer's homely man-servant afford to make such costly presents?

This thought was troubling Vera, when Lance broke in with a question:

"I say, how old could Laurie Wharton be? I wish we had seen him!"

"Older than you are," said Leo, "for Peter said he went to Persia with his father in 1867."

"But that was twenty years ago," objected the startled Vera. "You must be mistaken!"

"I'm sure I'm not!" retorted her brother. "I did not think of it at

this time, for you always spoke of him as a boy; but if it is seven years since he shot his first tiger—and Peter told us that distinctly—he cannot be so very young, can he?"

Vera began to feel perplexed, and wonder if she could have fallen into a strange error; nor was her bewilderment lessened when Mr. Huxtable was announced, and a very pleasant elderly gentleman appeared instead of the one she expected.

But an amused face peeped over the solicitor's shoulder.

"May I be introduced in my proper person? And will you promise, Miss Lansford, not to prejudice yourself against 'that boy,' now you see that he has grown old enough to give up all the daring and recklessness of his boyhood?"

"How could I fall into such a foolish mistake?" faltered Vera. "Why did not Peter undeceive me?"

"I fancy the old rascal never suspected that he was mystifying you," was the response. "He has been nearly all over the world with my father, and persists in still regarding me as the mere child I was when he first came to us."

"But he said you were ill."

Laurie Wharton made a wry face.

"I am sorry to say he spoke truly. I was quite *hors de combat* when we landed, but already I am feeling stronger, and hope soon to verify my doctor's prediction that English air will thoroughly cure me."

Vera was now sufficiently recovered from her embarrassment to join in the laugh against herself, and it was cheering to see that she had found two staunch friends in Laurie Wharton and Mr. Huxtable.

By their thoughtful kindness she was soon provided with a more efficient chaperon than Jennifer, in the shape of a dear old lady, who offered her society and a small weekly payment in return for a home, thus sparing Vera's pride the mortification of knowing that said payment and the baskets of game, etc., that supplemented it, were provided by Sir Damer and his son.

By the time Sir Damer reached England Laurie had quite regained his health. The first thing he confided to his father was that he had lost his heart, and was only waiting the parental sanction to woo and wed Vera Lansford.

It was readily given. Vera is no longer friendless and heavily burdened; her half brothers and sisters have been started in the world, Jennifer's old age provided for, and her own happiness made the chief care of the adoring husband she once dreaded as "That Boy!"

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