

as—as kindly as I could, which I couldn't well ask Adrian—"

"And you got them very fully answered," struck in Lady Marchmont. "Well, my dear, like all young folk, you must 'gang your ain gate.' 'Si la jeunesse savait' is all very well, but youth doesn't want to know, that's my experience, so I'll keep my advice to myself. But the little kitten Adrian has brought with him can scratch as well as purr, I fancy, though it is purring very assiduously just now."

"At least I shan't bring my scratches to you, to kiss and make well," laughed Lesley.

"Better not—they might be too deep for that," said the old woman grimly, and with this ominous last word Lesley left her and went out into the windy morning.

The weather had changed since hill and valley had lain steeped in the sunset glory. The moors were cloaked in grey mists, whose rugged fringes trailed low over the firwoods beyond the river, swirling hoarse and high down the glen. Every blast of wind brought down a shuddering rain of leaves to the ground to swell the deepening drifts or to be driven headlong in fantastic flight.

Lesley, accustomed to be abroad in all weathers, walked briskly along, rather enjoying the struggle against the rising wind. It was a relief to fight against something fresh and open and tangible after Lady Marchmont's hints, the head-shakings of her trustees, and the doubts as to the wisdom of her course which inevitably assailed her when her point was once carried, and the hot fit was succeeded by the cold.

Had she done right to meddle with the lives of others, to thrust in her hand amid the wheels of fate and divert their course? She had asked herself this question more than once since that memorable evening when Adrian had come up and had stood beside her in the dusk of the hall. Since, with a hot, hurt heart, she had turned away from him that morning upon the moor, she had not seen him. He had contrived to be too late for luncheon, and Alys had claimed the afternoon. Now she was bracing herself for the inevitable ordeal of meeting him at dinner, and blaming herself for not having made sufficient allowance for his position and the point of view it inevitably entailed. No man worth counting on cared to be indebted to a woman, not even when love had made them one and "mine and thine" were happily merged in "ours." How much less, then, was to be hoped for from friendship? She had been too hasty, as she so often was. She had expected Adrian at once to give up the hopes and aims of struggling years, while if she had been more patient—

"Lesley," Adrian's voice had said at her side, and she turned to him with a start, "you told me this morning," he began, without any preamble, "that I was ungenerous—perhaps I was. I have never thought that of you, and I can't give you a better proof of it than by asking you to forget what I said to-day, and let me serve you as you wish."

"Oh, Adrian, I am so glad; you have made me very happy," she exclaimed, involuntarily stretching out her hands to him, too relieved for the moment to wonder what had led to this sudden and startling change of front.

Amid the fire-chased shadows she could not clearly see his face, but as he caught and held her hands in a close clasp something struck chill through her thrill of relief and joy. It was wholly absurd, and yet somehow she felt half frightened at this unlooked-for fulfilling of her desire. She knew that she had taken Adrian's refusal as final, that when he had said, "It would not be honourable," she had never expected him to yield. How had he so swiftly reconciled her offer with his honour? But the question passed, and the curious, momentary sensation with it, as he went on in the same almost over-steady tone.

"At least you will let me *try* to serve you—that is all I ask. We shall be wise to regard it as an experiment, and if I prove a hopeless failure, then you can kick me out and try your experienced man."

"I am not afraid," she had said, the ring returning to her voice.

"Then we shall seal the bargain," said Adrian, lifting her hand to his lips in his easy, graceful fashion, and so the momentous question was settled and she had got her desire.

Now her vaguely recurrent doubts, awakened by Aunt Mary's "croaking," as she irreverently styled it, were put to momentary flight when, nearing the gates, she encountered a draggled and melancholy figure.

"What a dreadful day," pouted Alys, as Lesley came up. "Do you often have weather like this?"

"I am afraid I must confess that we do," said Lesley, "but then I am so used to it, I don't mind it, or rather I love being out of doors in all weathers, there is always something to see and to enjoy. I

sometimes think that a grey sky brings out the colouring even more than a bright one. See how green that moss shines out against the dull light."

"Perhaps," said Alys, without looking round. "I suppose one might get accustomed to it in time," dubiously.

Her quick eyes were running over Lesley's short, serviceable tweed skirt, her easy coat, and her plain, close-fitting felt hat. Hideous, she mentally pronounced them, but undeniably suitable, if one must be out in such horrible weather, though where the necessity came in she could not see. Her conviction was strengthened by the knowledge that her gauze frills were limp and flabby with the damp, that her trailing skirt had slipped more than once into the mud when both hands had been required to maintain the poise of her hat against the assaults of the wind.

"I can't see why anyone should *want* to go out on such a day," she said dolefully, "but Adrian fairly dragged me out. He says I am far too much in the house, but where could one be better on a day like this?" with a shiver. "He wanted me to go to the village, or somewhere, with him. It is not so bad here," with a condescending glance at the roadway, rolled to the last pitch of smooth firmness, "but once beyond the gates—look!" tragically. She lifted a shabby-smart little French slipper, its absurd heel crusted and clogged with mud, much as a dog might hold up a hurt paw.

Lesley smiled.

"You will have to follow my example; nothing else will do for our roads here," glancing down at the natty, thick-soled boots displayed by her short skirt. "But there is no need always to walk; perhaps you prefer riding."

"Thank you, I haven't learned yet," said Alys stiffly, and indeed a hippogriff would have been as feasible a mount at Halcyon Villa as a lady's horse.

"You could soon learn. Adrian could soon teach you," urged Lesley kindly. Her hands were always full, but in the press of legal and other business during the last few days she felt that she had perhaps somewhat neglected her guest—her new house-mate, rather. "Have you seen the greenhouses yet? Would you care to look round them, or would you rather go back to the house?" she asked, wondering what she could do to entertain this girl, who looked so forlorn.

"Thank you, I should like to see the greenhouses," said Alys submissively, "but I am sorry to take up your time, everyone says you are so busy."

"I am not so desperately busy as all that," said Lesley with a laugh, to cover a slight sigh over the dozen things she had wanted to do this morning. However, to make acquaintance with Alys was more important, and in any case she had wanted a few minutes alone with the girl.

They turned to the long line of glass gleaming white under the low sky, and as they stepped in Alys drew in a deep breath of the warm, moist, heavily-scented air.

"I should like to live in here!" she exclaimed, in the first spontaneous-sounding words which Lesley had yet heard her utter.

"I would rather have the open air and the heather," said Lesley.

Alys looked at her pityingly, and then wandered on from one mass of glowing colour to another. "And Miss Home was mistress of all this, and would rather tramp through the mud in a man's boots," she was thinking disdainfully, with a sigh over the unequal ways of life.

"Shall we sit down?" said Lesley, when they reached one or two seats grouped round a little tinkling fountain. For a moment or two there was silence, save for the whisper of the water; then Lesley said, with some difficulty, "I am glad that Adrian has decided to stay. I feared at first that it would be very difficult to persuade him."

"There was not much difficulty in that," said Alys simply, looking up from some gardenias she was listlessly arranging. "I told him I should like it, and that settled the matter."

Lesley glanced round and met the gaze of the limpid eyes, as clear to all seeming as the tiny pool of water at their feet. Then she looked hastily away. The scent of the gardenias suddenly seemed sickeningly heavy, the air intolerably hot. A word from this pale girl at her side had been enough to clinch a momentous decision, which for all her own arguments and entreaties had still hung doubtful. But of course it was quite right—surely a man's first duty was to please his wife, if he could.

"I am glad you wanted to stay here. I hope you will like it," she forced herself to say, and was surprised at the effort it cost her to make her voice sound, as she hoped, cordial. "But I hope that you won't find it dull, that it won't be too great a change from town, for, of course, we shall be very quiet this winter," she added.

Alys's face fell. What had seemed so absurd

when Adrian had first suggested it, did not seem quite so impossible now. It would be hard to say what vague but brilliant visions she had been cherishing. Still, she reassured herself by thinking that Miss Home's ideas of "quietness" might differ as much from her own as their circumstances did.

"How funny; that is just what Adrian asked me, too," she said. "There is no place quite like London, is there, but I am sure I could not be dull here," with effusion. "But I should like you to understand, dear Miss Home, that it wasn't so much of myself I was thinking when I told Adrian I wanted to stay, though of course I did want ever so much. Though it's hard for Adrian in many ways, it means so much for him to be at Strode again—a wife soon learns her husband's thoughts, doesn't she, and life has been such a grind in town; and though he needed a change so much, he couldn't have got it but for coming here, and I think it so sweet of you to have Adrian and me here. It's more than that—when one remembers everything it's—*it's great!*" and over her clasped hands, still half full of the gardenias, she gazed earnestly at Lesley.

Lesley rose hastily. Had Lady Marchmont been right, or was it some confused, unacknowledged consciousness which had made her smart under these simple-seeming words and glances? For the present she felt no desire for further intimate talk with Mrs. Adrian Skene. There was still something to be said, however.

"I suppose there should be no secrets between husband and wife," she said, with rather a faint smile, "but you needn't tell Adrian anything about this. Travelling and leaving home cost a great deal and mourning is always expensive, and of course you hadn't time to provide yourself with it." She hastily drew an envelope from an inner pocket of her coat and put it into Alys's not unwilling hands. "Oh, please, don't!" earnestly, as Alys, peering into the envelope and between the folds of the strip of pink paper, began to exclaim:

"But, Miss Home, this is a fortune—"

"Not much of a fortune," went on Lesley hastily, and flushing hotly the while. "Black things are always horridly dear—"

"But must I wear black? It makes me look so pale—I look a perfect fright," exclaimed Alys, with that sudden droop of the mouth which was so child-like and so pitiful.

Lesley was forced to smile.

"During the day at least, I am afraid it would be expected, and that is why I have ventured to do this, for no one has a store of black clothes on hand—but you might wear white in the evening," she added, her smile reflecting the sudden radiance on Alys's face.

Surely her first impression was right. Alys was only a child after all, was Lesley's conclusion, as she hurried away to escape the girl's outburst of thanks.

CHAPTER VII.

"Adrian, shall I do? Now look at me for once, please, not through me nor beyond me, but look at *me*—*me*, and tell me if I shall do."

"Do for what? My dear child, where on earth are you going?" exclaimed Adrian, gazing at her astonished.

"Adrian, you can't possibly have forgotten—to lunch at Wedderburne to meet Sir Neil's sister, Mrs. Kenyon. Why, I've been counting the hours. It's the first prospect of a little change in all the weeks I've been here. We can't go anywhere because of 'the bereavement,' as that stodgy old clergyman's wife always calls it, and I believe Lady Marchmont would have put a spoke in our wheel to-day, but she is so keen for Miss Home to go to Wedderburne," with a quick glance at her husband. "And nobody has been here but a few high and mighty county folk, who can only see me by a great effort, and some Noah's Ark people from the town, and I don't see why I should trouble myself to entertain Shem, Ham, and Japhet and, above all, their wives."

"Why, Alys, this is a different story. I thought that if only you were at Strode," began Adrian.

"That I should be quite happy," broke in Alys with rather a forced laugh. "But I am happy," she said eagerly, "and I am sure I shall be *quite* happy if I weren't quite so much alone. You know, I've never been used to it. Must you be out all day and every day, Adrian? It is not very lively for me, sitting for hours over the fire with a book, or winding a little wool for Lady Marchmont, if she's in a good humour and chances to remember my existence."

"But what can I do, dear?" said Adrian gravely. "I have both to learn my work and to do it, and I'm bound to justify my cousin's choice of me—"

"And is Miss Home teaching you? She is always with you," broke in Alys pertly, though the eyes which she hastily averted were piteous.

(To be continued)