

When I come to myself, but one Frank is left me, and he and I are speeding rapidly to our new home; my eyes are red and swollen, and I have the pale cheeks and unstrung feeling of a person who has cried herself ill. Fortunately we have no companions. The journey is a long one across country, with breaks and frequent changes, and trains to be caught, with only one minute to spare. Fortunately I am a good traveller—and it is well that I am forced to check my grief and turn my mind to other things. Little Frank and I are both weary when we reach Sloughbury, the small unimportant station where we must alight. I have no maid with me; the child is old enough for me to see after myself, so I have parted with nurse as a needless expense.

He clings to my skirt, tired and cross, as I collect our boxes, and, this done, I turn to the porter and ask if any carriage has been sent for us from Eyreton Court.

"Carriage from Eyreton Court, ma'am? Was it Eyreton Court you said?"

I say it again, and again a stare and repetition of my own words is all the answer. I turn to the station-master, as a person of superior intelligence; but the station-master also looks surprised, and shakes his head in strong disbelief of the possibility of any vehicle whatever being in waiting from Eyreton Court.

"Are you going there, ma'am?" he asks civilly.

"I must go there," say I pitifully, looking first at my tired baby and then along the vacant railway track, but its long lines guide my eyes to no other haven. "I am Captain Eyreton's wife," I explain with dignity—"Mrs. Francis Eyreton. I am come to stay at the Court with my uncle; something must have been sent for me."

"Well, ma'am," says the station-master in a tone of confidential apology, "I doubt if there is anything at the Court to send. Mr. Eyreton lives secluded-like, and he don't have occasion much for vehicles. I could get you a cart," he continues, pitying my disconcerted helpless look, "but it would take some time. If you do not mind, the carrier is starting now—he'll take your boxes; and, if I might make bold to suggest, perhaps you would take a seat too."

For one moment I hesitate. It is not a very dignified mode for Mrs. Francis Eyreton to arrive at her husband's inheritance, perched among the carrier's baggage; but it seems the only chance of reaching it at all to-night, so I swallow my pride and accept thankfully.

Twilight has almost faded when we drive up an ill-kept avenue and stop in front of a large, once handsome, but now almost ruinous-looking house. Only one gleam of light shows sign of habitation through the whole darkness, and this streams from one of the deep windows to the left of the hall door. The carrier takes little Frank from my arms, helps me to descend, pulls lustily at the rusty bell-handle, and then drives off to the back of the house to deposit my luggage. Five or ten minutes pass without any answer being accorded to the summons; and I am just gathering courage for another attempt, when the light leaves the window and travels into the hall. A slow step approaches the door: bolts are drawn and chains unfastened, and an old man looks out, holding a flickering candle high above his head.

As he steps into view, an undefinable likeness to my husband assures me of his identity, and I cry—

"Sir—Mr. Eyreton!"

But the words have scarcely left my lips when the candle drops from his shaking hand, and he leans against the door for support.

"What brings you here?" he cries, scanning my face. "Who are you?"

"Frank's wife," I stammer. "He sent me—you said we might come." And here I stop short, for even in the dim light the old man's face looks pallid, and his lips form words he has no voice to utter. At last, with a great effort, he speaks in a slow wandering tone.

"Frank, my son, you must know my repentance; why do you mock me, offering me opportunities that are but fantasy?"

I touch his arm, crying—

"Are you ill? What is it?"

My touch rouses him, he starts, looks into my face and murmurs—

"The likeness is not fancy. Who are you?" Then more calmly—

"You spoke of Frank—whom do you mean?"

"Frank your nephew," I falter, heartily frightened, for the old man seems really mad. "He has gone to the Cape, and you said we might come here."

As I speak, lights appear, and two or three women-servants enter the hall. One, old and pleasant-faced, hastens forward, and, on seeing me, scans my face as curiously as her master has done, and with a slightly startled air. My speech has cleared matters a little to him, for he replies in a perfectly sane but somewhat sarcastic tone—

"Oh, so you are the girl of whom I have heard—the 'blow' to the family pride, my nephew's hopeful achievement!"

The old woman touches his arm, and whispers—

"Don't, sir—don't! 'Tis a young thing, and —"

Mr. Eyreton's face changes with a sudden spasm.

"So Captain Francis Eyreton has handed you over to me to be lodged and cared for till he can undertake the trust again?"

His voice is gentler, and I venture to suggest meekly—

"He wrote and asked you."

"Did he? I forget. Did I tell you to come? Well, enter then Norris, and to them."

He leaves us, and returns to his own room. Mrs. Norris comes forward civilly.

"The master forgets things," she says. "We did not know you was expected; but you are welcome, ma'am. Is that the Captain's little boy? Let me take him. I hope the young gentleman is well."

I am far too frightened to preserve my dignity. The kind face overcomes me, and, as she takes the child from my arms, I clutch her dress, crying—

"What is it? Why does he behave so?"

"The poor master? He's taken aback, ma'am—no wonder!" she adds under her breath, with another quick glance at my face. "'Tis a mistake, my dear ma'am; don't you mind. But whatever on earth made the Captain send you here?"

Days and weeks have passed, and I am quite at home in the old house, quite used to the new, strange, lonely life. We never see any one; and the evenings often fall without my having exchanged a syllable with any one save my child. Mr. Eyreton is rarely visible. He keeps in his rooms below. My meals are served in one of the many empty apartments in the upper part of the house, two or three of which, bare and half-furnished like the rest, have been put into some sort of order for our abode. I should think that my husband's uncle—I cannot bring myself to call him mine—had quite forgotten our existence, but for the curious friendship that has arisen between him and little Frank.

The child strayed from my room one day, and was found by him playing in the large hall. I do not wonder he was taken by my bright handsome little boy; but it was more than a kind passing fancy. Since then he sends daily for the little fellow, and makes him his companion. At first it was only for a few minutes; now it is often more than an hour before the child returns to me. At the outset it made me uneasy—I feared some harm; for our strange reception has made me suspect that the old gentleman may be somewhat out of his mind at times; but now I have gained courage, and the desire that was wont to haunt me to steal away with my child, in order to live in some more cheerful though humble abode, has been crushed by the force of circumstances. I am well off here, and have nowhere else to go to, so I yield to fate, as we all do, and live out the life put ready to my hand.

The weather has been beautiful; and, though badly kept, the Court is a fine old place. Frank and I spend our days in the fields and woods amidst the late spring freshness, and the child is brown and rosy. I am a little worn and wearied by the dull monotony of my life and the anxiety for my husband; but his letters are regular, and so far all is well. Of the interior of the house I know very little beyond my own corridor. I believe it is bare and desolate enough. Mrs. Norris, in one of her lamentations over the departed glories of Eyreton Court, has accounted for its present condition. Some twenty years ago, when the old man lost his son, everything saleable in the house was sold to pay off heavy debts—the son's, I suppose. Once I asked what the son was like, and what was the story connected with his death. The second query she evaded, and answered the first by referring me to some picture down-stairs, in the deserted suite of rooms to the right of the hall door.

I have never had the curiosity to look for it; but one day, as Frank and I return from our walk somewhat sooner than is our usual custom, the fancy takes me to make a little exploration in this unknown territory. Frank has scampered off in the direction of the kitchen, where he is sure of care and petting, and I am alone as I gently try the door. It is locked, but the key has not been removed, and, turning it with a little difficulty, I enter the room.

All the shutters are closed, and it is quite dark save for the light from the open door. I grope my way across to the centre window, and undo the shutter. This room is one of two occupying the right wing of the house, and does not look to the front, but out on what has once been a well-laid-out pleasure-ground at the back of the building. The window is made to open on to the lawn by a half-door and a sash, which I push up a little to let some air into the long-disused room.

There is little to see by the light I have taken the pains to admit. The room is empty but for some forms ranged round the walls, above which are fastened branches of withered dusky evergreens, and a festoon of faded pink calico has fallen from its nail and waves drearily in the draught from the window.

On the wall facing the door hangs the picture I have come to see—yes, it must be it. It is a full-length portrait of a young man wrapped in a blue cloak, with a riding-whip in his hand. As I gaze I am startled by the strong likeness to my husband. Old Mr. Eyreton resembles him somewhat, old as he is; but this seems Frank himself, only however as he might look after some illness, white and thin, with a curious mournful light in the dark eyes.

At first I remain fascinated by their strange earnest expression, trying to separate the likeness and the unlikeness to my husband. Then, as I stand alone in the great room, the strange sad eyes, confronting mine seem to move—to live. In vain I laugh at my nervous folly. A sudden irresistible fear takes possession of me; I hasten to the door, and, as I pass the threshold, meet old Mr. Eyreton issuing from the opposite room—his study.

I have done no wrong, and yet I wish he had not caught me indulging what may seem to him an impertinent curiosity. He seems surprised