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Won at Last

"Do see him, Mona; your feelings may be touched when you find yourself face to face with a man who sincerely loves you. And this man has proved his sincerity."

"Or his determination to gratify his whim, cost what it may," added Mona.

"You have no right to impugn his motives. Great as my desire is to see you lifted safe above the bitter flood of poverty, I would not urge you to a repulsive marriage."

"Forgive me, grannie. I am ungracious, selfish. I marry Mr. Waring, I will do it cheerfully."

She rose and brought the writing materials. "I will see him, but I do not promise to accept him, unless—"

"Let him plead his own cause," interrupted Mrs. Newburgh, stretching out her hand for pen and paper. "He will induce you to take a different view, I am sure."

"With difficulty she traced a few lines, excusing their brevity on the score of illness, and asking him to call on the following day, when Miss Jocelyn would receive him. "You must address it, dear. He does not know your hand."

"It is of no consequence," said Mona, removing the writing materials, and taking out an envelope, she sat down to direct it.

"It is not natural, Mona, to be so cold and indifferent. Yet I have not detected any liking on your part for any other man, except, indeed—"

"No, no," interrupted Mona, quickly, assured, dear grannie. "I will love young Waring when you see him."

"Oh, yes, I dare say I shall. Now, grannie, I am going to read you the paper, try and listen—it may rest your brain a little."

"I will, Mona, I will; because you have given me a little hope."

The rest of the dull, drear November day Mona moved slowly perhaps, but firmly, as if keenly alive to the work she had to do. She sat by the window, her clear perception of duty and responsibility, was another sense of coming pain and sacrifice. Were she alone, with only self to provide for, she could launch herself upon the ocean of life—fearlessly, hopelessly. But she must not desert her grandmother; and if she could provide for her in "accepting service"—so she termed it in her own mind—with Mr. Waring. If only—it was not to be marriage.

Late in the afternoon a card was brought her. "Captain St. John Lisle, the Hussars." She thought an instant, peered in a line on it, "So sorry! I cannot leave Mrs. Newburgh, and sent it back to him."

This incident was in Waring's favor. "I should like to tell him that I am engaged to his protegee, when we next meet," she thought. "Yet I have base it to be thus influenced by pique against another man, in my acceptance of another—another who perhaps really loves me, for I suppose I shall accept him. As George Elliot says, 'One may rave upon the heights, but you know that your persistent self awaits you on the plain, the terrible dead level of necessity to which I am fast sinking. But, right or wrong, I will pose to Captain Lisle as a hard-headed worldling. He shall not pity me, or suspect my contemptible weakness. He shall not fancy he was in such danger of being dragged down by my misfortunes that it was necessary to pass me to some one else. Could I have betrayed my feelings so completely, that he should think it necessary to take decided measures for self-defense? Yet how utterly I believed in him! Was I self-deceived, or—but I will not think any more of myself, and my folly, my contemptible self! I ought to forget self altogether. It is the best way to be happy. Ah! I shall I ever be happy again!"

"I cannot see him," murmured Mrs. Newburgh. "You must go, Mona—explain how incapable I feel."

Sir Robert was a thorough country gentleman. He seemed to bring an atmosphere of the woods and fields with him into the chill, dull dining-room, which had a deserted air. A middle-aged, middle-sized man, plump and rosy, with pepper and salt colored mutton-chop whiskers, looking always as if he had come fresh from a bath. His shirt fronts were the snowiest, his clothes the glossiest, his voice had a mellow ring in it, which attested for the habit, authoritative key in which he usually spoke.

"Well!" he exclaimed, taking Mona's hand in one of his, and setting it with the other, "how is the poor grannie? I protest I never was more out up than when I found how desperately she has been swindled! She would stick to the ship, in spite of all that Oakley or I could say. The few solvent shareholders backed out some years ago, and the rest are mostly men of straw, so they'll not leave Mrs. Newburgh a rap."

"Poor dear grannie is very, very miserable, Sir Robert. It is so curious that so clever a woman should have believed in what many of her friends and advisers doubted."

"She was always obstinate, my dear, devilish obstinate! However, I have a bit of good news. A friend of mine wants to buy the house. He will give a decent sum, too; and I want your grandmother to have the money to do for you, or some one of that kind."

Go, ask her if she will be able to see me and Oakley to-morrow, that we may settle about it. It will be a something between you and want."

"I will go and tell her," said Mona, hastening away. "Will it be enough to save me from the necessity of marrying any one?" she thought.

Sir Robert Everard put his hands in his pockets, and paced the room, whistling softly.

"Poor old soul! won't last long, I dare say. The girl will marry; no doubt of that; she is deuced handsome—a well-bred one, too. Would run smooth and easy in double harness. Fellows are cooler and more cautious than they were in my days, but there are plenty of rich ones who might indulge themselves in a handsome, penniless wife."

"My grandmother will be glad to see you to-morrow at twelve," said Mona, coming back.

"All right; just sit down while I write a line to Oakley, asking him to meet me. We will have a consultation, then he'll see what is best to be done; we must secure whatever money Mrs. Newburgh gets for the house from the claws of the liquidators. Lady Mary wants her—both of you—to come down to the Chase. I am in to shoot in Ross-shire; Evelyn comes with me. The other two are going for a month with their aunt to Biarritz; so you will be quite quiet. A change will do your grandmother a lot of good, and set her up again, hey?"

"Thank you so much, it would, indeed. I am afraid it will be some time before she can be moved," returned Mona, who shrunk from the idea of visiting the Chase again.

"You will be all the better for being turned out to grass yourself, my dear," he resumed kindly. "It's hard lines for a young thing like you to be plunged into such trouble. Why, you are not as old as Evelyn. I suppose grandamma is not in the sweetest of temper—a little hand in the mouth just now, eh?"

"Oh, no, Sir Robert; she is an angel. She seems to have lost faith in herself; she has not the force to insist on anything; it breaks my heart to see her so pitifully gentle."

"She must be badly hit. I am awfully sorry for her—for both of you. Just write that, my dear, will you? I'll post it as I go along. And I must leave you now. I am going to dine with Rivers. You remember Rivers who was at the rather proud of his staying nearly a week with us; but he did not get such dinners in my house as he has in his own."

"Sir Robert Everard talked on in his kindly, easy way, while Mona wrote the note.

Mr. Oakley obeyed the summons. Mrs. Newburgh, revived by her new hopes, was up and dressed when Sir Robert and the solicitor arrived. She had, with the help of Webster's arms, descended to the drawing room; but she looked like a ghost of her former self.

Then ensued a long, melancholy insistence, at which Mrs. Newburgh insisted her granddaughter should be present, and from which the latter gathered that it was of no use endeavoring to save anything out of the wreck—that whatever the unfortunate shareholders possessed must pass into the clutches of the company's creditors; a call had already been made, and would be followed by others, until all was swallowed up. It was therefore deemed more prudent for Mrs. Newburgh to reside in the house she had bought, than to move to another for which she would have to pay rent. Her income had of course been narrowed to a miserable eighty or ninety pounds a year, and even on that she could not long count.

"You see, Mona, the condition to which we are reduced," said Mrs. Newburgh, when their friendly counsellors, with grave faces and kindly expressed sympathy, had withdrawn. "I purposely asked you to be present at this conference, that you might understand the true state of the case. I leave you to draw your own conclusions. No, dear, do not reopen the discussion. I trust to your own common sense and right feeling. I am quite exhausted. Ring for Webster to help me to my room. I can see no one else to-day—no one—remember, Mona."

Thus cut off from remonstrance, Mona felt she was left to her fate, and Mr. Waring; grannie was resolved to leave the decision—the responsibility—so her. Mrs. Newburgh had not long returned to her own room, and had just taken some refreshment, when Mr. Waring's card was brought. A strong feeling of humiliation and disgust arose in Mona's heart, the calm indifference of which she boasted the previous day failed her at the moment of trial.

"Do not keep the poor young man waiting," said Mrs. Newburgh.

"It is frightful, having to go deliberately to listen to an offer of marriage," cried Mona, starting up and walking to the window instead of the door.

"I thought you would not mind."

"I thought so, too; but I will go, dear grannie."

"She came back quickly, kissed the old woman's cheek, and disappeared.

Mona went rapidly downstairs, and straight into the dining-room, without

allowing herself to pause for a moment—half frightened, angry, at her own faintness of spirit.

Mr. Waring stood on the hearth-rug. He was not so tall as Lisle; his broad shoulders and rather short neck further diminished his height. He was built more for strength than grace, and, though not fat, was, it must be admitted, fleshy. His hair was dark, almost black, abundant and wavy, and his broad, good-humored face was redeemed from absolute plainness by a pair of fine, soft, dark-brown eyes. He was in general ruddy and fresh-looking, but the excitement, indeed, it may be said, the terror of the moment, had blanched his cheeks, till he met Mona's eyes, when he blushed furiously.

She hesitated after she had crossed the threshold, and closed the door, standing tall, inflexible, sad, stiffer, with her hearting-dress of black silk and cashmere she possessed, a lace scarf pinned round her throat with an old-fashioned brooch, her bright hair turned loosely back surmounting her fair, pale face like an aureole.

"I am so much, so very much obliged to you for seeing me!" exclaimed Waring, starting forward to take her hand, which he shook nervously and dropped immediately. Mona, murmured something, he did not hear what, and sat down beside the fire.

Waring resumed his position on the hearth-rug. An awful pause ensued. Mona gazed at the glowing coals, and thought of Lisle's face, so perfect, easy self-possession. Waring cudgeled his brain for some suitable phrase to open the dreaded yet longed-for conversation. The result was resting change of attitude, and the words, "Awful nasty weather." His voice was strong and harsh. "I hope you took no cold on your journey to town."

It was an unlooked allusion. "Not a cold; I had a slight chill," returned Mona, who had some sense of humor.

She raised her eyes as she spoke, and meeting his, could not restrain a kindly smile, feeling no little sympathy with his uneasiness and evident sense of difficulty.

"You are amused, I dare say," he cried, his power of speech unlocked by the magic of her smiling eyes; "you must be amused, to hear me blundering like an idiot about the weather, when my mind and heart are filled with hope and fear. Tell me, Miss Jocelyn, did Mrs. Newburgh show you my letter?"

"She did."

"And will you—will you let me tell you how awfully I was taken with the first time I ever saw you at that Richmond dinner Lady Mary Everard gave last year—before you were presented, you know?"

"Were you there?" asked Mona, dreamily.

At that dinner she had first met Lisle. He had not spoken to her, but she had even then felt a degree of attraction to him which surprised her, and he had remarked her—

"Oh, I don't suppose you saw me. I never can push. Young Everard and some other fellows were round you all the time; but I have thought of you ever since. Do you know, your balls were the first I went to. I thought they were all rot. I like the racing set better. I used to go only for the chance of meeting you—and you would scarcely ever dance with me. To be sure, I am a stupid beggar about dancing."

A pause.

"I think I always gave some dances," said Mona, rather at a loss what to reply.

"Oh, you were always civil!" exclaimed Waring, taking a little cup from the mantel-piece and turning it round and round as if examining the pattern. "Not like some girls, who are either killing sweet, or sink you with their wiles, are gentle and grave. I used to think I should never have the luck to ask you to marry me, but—as you see, Mrs. Newburgh came to grief, I was ashamed not to offer at least to be of use to you."

"And are you content that I should accept you as a refuge from the ills of poverty?" asked Mona, looking gravely, solemnly at him.

"I am," said Waring, after a minute's pause, putting down the cup, and speaking more collectedly. "It's not pleasant, of course, but I have faith in you. If you promise to be my wife, you will try to like me, and I'll try to please you with all my soul and strength, as somebody says in the Bible, 'I will,'"

"I think," added Waring, to enforce his professions—his religious studies were slight and somewhat mixed. "And it will go hard if I don't get you to love me, unless—unless," his large brown eyes grew imploring—"you care for some other fellow? For God's sake, don't say you love any other fellow! I never fancied you did."

"I do not indeed." Her tone carried conviction to her hearer.

"Then—then, Miss Jocelyn, could you make up your mind to marry me? I think you might grow to like me by and by, and I need not be so much delighted to carry out any plan, and, with emphasis, "that you think would be best for Mrs. Newburgh's comfort."

"It is a tremendous question to answer," said Mona, hesitating, yet feeling to her own satisfaction, that there was no other way left, and she was touched by his unaffected humility. "Yesterday of the day before I looked on you as a stranger; to-day I am to decide if I am to pass my whole life with you or not. I must say what sounds unkind, that I do not love you, that if this great misfortune had not befallen Mrs. Newburgh, I should probably have refused you—so I do not deserve your love!"

"But I cannot help giving it to you! And if you do make up your mind to take me, you might just let me forget that you were driven to it."

"Yes, I am very ungracious. There is another circumstance I ought to mention; you may not like to know that my name is not Jocelyn. My grandmother always called me by my second baptismal name; I am really Mona Craig. My father was of very humble origin, I believe; and Mrs. Newburgh never gave me a mother for marrying him; but I dearly loved him as a little child, though I have forgotten what he was like."

"I don't care what your name is as long as you will take mine. I am no great thing as regards family myself. I have heard something of Mrs. Newburgh's whim before."

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best to be done. Don't you fancy that I would hold back because you refused me. Whether you say yes or no, I would ask nothing better than to be of use to you; but not being a relation, it would be awkward for—"

"It would be impossible," interrupted Mona, in a low tone; then pressing her clasped hands together tightly, she said with some solemnity—"Since you believe I could make you happy—"

"You will be my wife!" interrupted Waring eagerly in his turn.

"I will, Mr. Waring, and try to be a good one." She grew very pale as she spoke.

"You are a great deal too good for me, and as you do not care for any other fellow, perhaps you may end by caring for me."

There was an awkward pause, then Waring walked over to the writing table and took up a paper-knife with which he played nervously.

"There are one or two things I should like to tell you, if you do not mind?"

"What can he be going to confess?" thought Mona. She, however, only bent her head in silence.

"I have not been as steady as I ought to be," resumed Waring, looking down and growing red. "You see, my brother and myself were brought up by an old bachelor guardian, and had no women in the house, and that made us rather rough. Then I have lost a good bit at cards and races. I'm a little too fond of play, but—not that you are so very good at it, as to promise me your hand, I have an object to live for, and I will never touch a card again, and I will never lay anything beyond a pony on a race, and I'll try to be—"

"I am sorry to hear that," said Mona, "I am sorry to hear that you are not steady, but I will give you my permission to go and tell Sir Robert Everard? He is a good fellow, and we'll settle something about Mrs. Newburgh. She ought to get out of town away from annoyances."

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al when the author himself gets stuck— "This is very interesting," I told him, "I shall certainly remember what you have said. But, look here, supposing one doesn't know how to begin, supposing one wishes to relate a very delicate matter and don't know where to start—could one lead off with a row of asterisks?"

"Well," he began doubtfully, "of course you might—"

"In that case," I said, "I certainly shall."

"Suppose," said Lillian, "you wanted something very much—"

"She stopped and began to play with her fan.

"And suppose," she went on, "somebody offered it to you, and she gave a little sigh."

"I should take it," I said. "It seemed a pretty easy problem, but there's general consent, but that's simple rule."

"And suppose you refused it? . . . once . . . and twice . . . and the supposition—"

"Look here, let's take a concrete case," I said. "I was rather proud of 'concrete,' but when I often say quite good things at dances. 'Let's take a concrete case,' I repeated."

"All right, Dick; Dick, what do you want most in the world?"

"A motor-bicycle," I replied, promptly. "Some fools say motor-bicycling is going out, but that's simple rule."

"A motor-bicycle," Lillian repeated softly to herself. "Well, then, Dick, suppose Arthur offered you a motor-bicycle—"

"Yes, may we have that over again, please?"

"Suppose Arthur offered you a motor-bicycle—"

"Look here, let's let that idea sink in a bit first."

I closed my eyes and leaned back, while Lillian fanned me vigorously.

"No, it's no good," I said at last. "But, Dick, we're only supposing."

"Oh, well—go on."

"And suppose you refused it—"

"Great Scott," I interrupted, "do you think I'm an idiot?"

"People are sometimes," said Lillian, very sadly. "I don't know why."

"But a motor-bicycle—"

"Even with better things than that. Well, Dick, suppose Arthur offered it again, and you refused it again—"

I put my hands over my ears.

"Please, Lillian," I said. "I can't stand it. The mere thought is agony. It almost seems as though I had lost it. Don't go on."

"If the thought is agony, what about the actual thing?"

"I had a sudden and tremendous suspicion."

"I say," I began excitedly, "you don't mean that somebody actually has offered you a motor-bicycle and you've refused it?"

"It wasn't a motor-bicycle," said Lillian, with a smile.

"Oh, well, then—"

"But something almost as important," and she gave a little laugh.

"Look here, what has happened? Somebody offered you something?"

"A bracelet, let's say."

"Well—"