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A True Diamond

CHAPTER IV.
An Early Scholar.

"Mr. Diggins told us, miss. He wasn't over pleased."

"I hope he didn't let the sun go down upon his wrath! That's wrong. I don't know whether to take Trick with me or not. Better not, perhaps, this morning! I'm going to see the Kanakas."

"Are you, miss?" asked Mrs. Homes, who never acknowledged ignorance.

"Yes, good-bye. It's down the avenue and turn to the left, isn't it?"

"That's the village, miss, a mile from here or more. Mr. Hales is a nice gentleman. He's our clergyman, quite a young gentleman."

"I'll go and see. Thank you and good-bye." Here Toney shook hands with the cook. "I should like to breakfast with you here some day. In Australia we all chummed together, because it was more convenient to my papa."

Mrs. Homes was too much surprised to answer, and it was only when Toney had disappeared through a side door that she exclaimed.

"Good gracious, Rose! She's the queerest young lady I've seen, and yet one can see she is a lady with all her odd ways."

"She's eat up all the butter," said Rose a little sorrowfully.

Toney was not yet out of the house however. The morning was so lovely that she could not go without Trick, and finding some back stairs, she managed to get back to her room without meeting any one. Earnestly begging Trick to behave himself, she ran down again, and Trick, barking for joy, ran by her side all along the great avenue. For the time being they were as happy as possible, and for a little while Toney forgot there was an Aunt Dove living in the same world as herself.

"If only Pups were here," said Toney, stopping short for want of breath; "but there is very little time, I guess, and I must find out

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at Aldersfield House." Mr. Hales at once jumped to a right conclusion as to the identity of the speaker, for there had already been a family consultation over Lady Dove's note.

"Miss Antonia Whitburn," he repeated.

"No, 'Toney,' that's what I answer to. I picked up this little one; but she is hungry, I'm sure. Does crying make you hungry, Mr. Hales? It does me. When I cried the cook at home had to bake two loaves extra."

"Oh!" said the Vicar. "Have you come for the answer to Lady Dove's note? I sent it by the groom."

"What note? Was it a note of surprise?" Toney laughed happily.

"A note about you—But perhaps if Lady Dove—"

"Oh, I know," exclaimed Toney, "she said last night you were to strengthen my principles. Are you good at that sort of thing?"

Mr. Hales was quite unable to keep his countenance.

"Anyhow, your principle of kindness won't want strengthening, I'm sure. You have been very kind to little Minnie. Come in, if you don't mind, and my sister will give the child some breakfast, and you too if you will."

"I've had mine, thanks, in the kitchen; but Minnie will be delighted. I didn't expect to pick up a little wandering Kanaka; but I'm glad I did."

"Kanaka! Ah!" Mr. Hales remembered just in time. "Australia of course," he added.

"They are so odd, and just like a sort of dumb animal that can talk. Is your sister at breakfast?"

"We breakfast early."

He was leading the way up a laurel-bordered path, all the while wondering what his mother and sister would say to this strange specimen, which to him, however, appeared delightfully original. Moreover, the girl's evident love of children had won his heart. Suddenly the Vicar came into view. It was an extremely pretty house, with gables and bow windows, and the garden was made beautiful by the care of loving hands, and not only by those of a hired gardener.

Spring flowers made the border gay; there were hyacinths, primroses, a few crocuses still lingering. Jonquils, anemones, winter heath in full flower, apricots and peaches in bloom against a distant wall. Close by one could see a patch of large, deep blue gentians, also some grape hyacinths trying to look proud, and squills slightly nodding in the tiny breeze and in all the nooks and corners were violets filling the air with their sweet scent.

"Oh!" said Toney. "Gracious stars! how pretty!"

The Vicar fairly laughed.

"So you don't know Lady Dove's proposal, Miss Whitburn?"

"Something Trick and I shall grow at, I expect. To heel, Trick. He is looking at your heels, Mr. Hales; I goes at them don't mind. It's a sign of respect. He took all the

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blackening off Mr. Diggins' shoes, Aunt Dove's butler, you know."

Trick, hearing the word heel, resisted no longer, and the Vicar felt his sign of respect in all its fullness. "I'll Toney again had recourse to reproaches, and was forced to drag him bodily away."

"He's very intelligent," said Mr. Hales, still laughing. "Come this way, please." He passed through an open French window and shouted "Mother!"

A grey-haired lady, who was still very pretty, came hastening in.

"Mother, I must introduce Miss Whitburn to you. You know little Minnie Thomas. She mistook the school hour and wants some breakfast. Miss Whitburn kindly carried her down the village street."

"How very kind of you, Silvia! Silvia! Here, my dear."

Toney stood almost mute, looking round at the pretty room and at the sweet-faced lady. Beauty in any shape always silenced Toney—for a minute. Silvia Hales soon entered. She was a fragile-looking girl of seventeen, much too grave and silent for her years. A constitutional delicacy had made her languid and quiet. It was often difficult to make her take an interest in any one besides her mother, whom she idolized.

"Silvia, this is Miss Whitburn, whom we have been talking about, and here is little Minnie Thomas wanting some breakfast. Cook will give her something nice to eat if you take her to the kitchen."

Silvia held out a thin white hand to Toney, who looked at it before shaking it. It seemed so fragile that Toney felt as if she were touching china that might break.

"Whatever did Aunt Dove write to you about?" she asked.

The three looked at each other, and then Silvia answered:

To be continued.

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