

MAB'S SISTER.

CHAPTER III.—CONTINUED.

I was away from him and his mild "don't you know" at last, and, going as far as I dare to the edge of the plateau, gaze down in a sort of rapturous dream upon the sunlit scene.

"Take care, Miss Gerard; if you were to get giddy it would be all up with you!" a voice says at my elbow; and a hand is gently placed on my arm, drawing me farther from the edge of the yawning precipice. "This is such a dangerous place," Mr. Oliphant goes on; "they ought to put some sort of a railing round."

"It is very grand!" I murmur.

"Very; one feels such an insignificant atom in the midst of it all; and yet," he adds, half to himself, "it was made for us and our enjoyment."

"And I am sure we appreciate it, Mr. Oliphant."

My tone is slightly injured. He laughs. "You do, certainly. Your face has been a study for the last ten minutes. You admire the beauties of nature, evidently, Miss Gerard."

"Who does not?" I ask, vexed at the tinge of sarcasm in his tone.

"Some people have not a particle of enthusiasm on the subject. Why, I came here once with a man whose only remark was, 'Ah, very good indeed; rather like a scene by Telbin!' Fancy comparing this—making a sweeping gesture with his hand—to a scientific work of art, done by the hand of man!"

I murmur a few words of acquiescence; then there is a pause.

"Where are the others?" I ask, after a while, finding the silence somewhat embarrassing. "Are they not coming?"

"I suppose so. I left them on the way," he answers carelessly; but upon his face there comes a look I have never seen there before, an expression of angry contempt. "By-the-bye," he continues, looking at me keenly, "have you and your cavalier quarreled? I met him just now with a most lugubrious expression on his face."

"He is a stupid boy not worth talking to," I answer pettishly; and then I repeat our recent conversation, at which Mr. Oliphant laughs heartily.

"Poor fellow!" he exclaims. "You are hard upon him, Miss Gerard. I am afraid Archer's society spoils you for that of less intellectual individuals."

The words are lightly spoken; but they anger me.

"At any rate, Lily seems to find his company interesting enough," I retort.

The remark is about as thoughtless a one as I could have chosen; but saying just what comes uppermost on the spur of the moment is a fault of which I have tried in vain to break myself. The arrow hits its mark this time with a vengeance. Mr. Oliphant starts and turns a dusky red under his bronze; but he only says shortly—

"Yes; your sister has good taste as well as you."

"It is nothing to do with taste on my part. I am always obliged to entertain him when he is with us."

"But you like him?"

"Yes; I like him well enough."

"And your sister?"

"Oh, she likes him too! He is rich, and a Baronet, you know; they always find favor with every one."

Again my idiotic freedom of speech. What has come to me lately, I wonder.

Mr. Oliphant leans against a projecting piece of rock, folds his arms, and regards me attentively.

"Archer has much to be thankful for," he says at length; and there is no sarcasm now in his tones. "I would give all I possess to be in his shoes."

"Why?"

The question comes in spite of me.

"He will gain the treasure which I covet above all earthly possessions," is his grave reply.

I turn away, with a strange pang at my heart. I have never fully realized till now that Lily has gained what I would give the world to possess. Yes, in spite of the feeling almost of dislike which I felt for him in former days, in spite of his indifference to myself and his open preference for my sister,

I love Geoffrey Oliphant with my whole heart. I know it now, and the knowledge is far from pleasant. But he will marry Lily, and I—

"Shall we find a seat?" Mr. Oliphant asks abruptly.

I start, color, and murmur a hurried assent. We find a sheltered nook, closed in with a sort of bower of tall feathery ferns, creeping plants, such as wild honeysuckle, blackberry, and jasmine. It commands a fine view of the scenery, and a mossy stone serves for a seat. We take our places on it, side by side, in silence; and then somehow the absurdity of the situation strikes me, and I begin to laugh.

Mr. Oliphant looks surprised.

"What is the joke?" he asks.

"Nothing," I reply, after the manner of my sex; "only I was wondering how we got here, and thinking what a pity it is we are not somebody else."

"I don't see the drift of your observation yet, Miss Gerard; but perhaps I am dull of comprehension. Let me see"—meditatively—"you were thinking it is a pity we were not somebody else. Who ought we to have been, may I ask?"

"Well"—I begin to feel rather confused—"I suppose I ought to have been Lily, or you—"

"Ought to have been Sir Basil Archer. I see."

His tones are grave, and he is regarding me with a look not pleasing to my vanity. Yet somehow I want him to know that Sir Basil cares for me, not Lily. It will make him so much happier.

"Sir Basil doesn't care for Lily," I say abruptly, with my usual headlong unthinking candor. "He—"

"I am not blind," Mr. Oliphant replies. "You need not trouble to explain."

"But I don't want you to be under any misapprehension, and think that Lily—"

"My dear Miss Gerard, pardon me. I do not for one instant suppose that your sister would encroach upon your prerogatives."

My prerogatives! What can he mean? At this moment the sound of voices reaches us from the other side of our screen. The rest of the party have arrived at the plateau.

But no; the voices are those of Sir Basil Archer and my sister only. I am about to rise, when a sentence catches my ear and arrests my progress. Mr. Oliphant too hears it, and puts out his hand to detain me. His face is pale, and he looks eager and excited as he makes a gesture for me to keep silence. Unwilling as I am to play the role of eavesdropper, it would never do to go out suddenly upon them now. And the words we hear are these, spoken in a tone of loving tenderness by Sir Basil—

"Indeed, dearest, I never cared for your sister. It is true I flirted with her, but only because you seemed to care so much for Oliphant's society"—my companion half rises—"I never loved any one but you, my Lily. Only say, darling, that you will be my wife!"

"This is dreadful! What shall we do? I cannot stay here any longer; it is so mean," I murmur beneath my breath to Mr. Oliphant. He catches my hand in his.

"Stay where you are!" he whispers back authoritatively.

"And you are quite sure, Basil, that you will never flirt with Mab again?" Lily says, in her soft coaxing voice. "You have made me so unhappy."

"My angel you shall never be unhappy again, if I can prevent it. Your sister is most charming"—much obliged to him, I am sure—"but it is you whom I love;" and then there is an expressive silence.

I can almost fancy I hear the sound of the kiss which I am sure Sir Basil is pressing upon the lips of his betrothed.

Then come some commonplace remarks about the view; but evidently the speakers have no thoughts to spare to the beauty around them; and soon they take their departure, their voices coming up to us fainter and fainter as they pass down the mountain path beneath us.

Mr. Oliphant and I look at each other in some embarrassment. The situation is awkward, to say the least. Here have we two been sitting for the last five minutes, listen-

ing to vows of love exchanged between those whom we have regarded as our own particular property! And I have actually been trying to impress upon Mr. Oliphant that Sir Basil cared for me. The hot blood mounts to my forehead, and I rise abruptly.

"Let us go down," I say; and without waiting for my companion, I commence a hasty descent, never stopping until I am half-way down the mountain, when I suddenly encounter father toiling up the steep path alone.

"Have you enjoyed it all, Mab? he asks anxiously.

"Yes," I reply eagerly, because of the mortification of my spirit—"I never enjoyed anything so much in all my life before!"

The rest of the day passes quickly away. I keep Robert Monkton at my side, and listen to his weak conversation, striving by so doing to obliterate from his mind my rudeness at the plateau. I succeeded so well that, by the time we reach home, he has signified to me his intention of making me an offer some day when he has "the tin, don't you know," which blissful prospect however fails to excite in my maiden breast the exquisite delight which it should have inspired there. On the contrary, I feel wretched and *distracted*, and make up my mind to hurry our return to Blandford forthwith.

Lily's engagement causes quite a stir in the family; every one is astonished, and I begin to feel a little consoled for my forwardness in supposing that I was Sir Basil's chosen bride by the discovery that everybody else thought the same.

Lily looks rather confused when she talks to me of her future; but I am too glad to get rid of Sir Basil to be anything but pleased at this new turn things have taken. Once only, when my sister seemed inclined to apologise for having usurped my rights, did my feeling of shamefulness return; but Lily is not observant; and my reply that I was very glad Sir Basil preferred her to me after all, for he would never have suited me for a husband, seemed to satisfy her that I was feeling no broken-hearted regret at his choice, but, on the contrary, rejoiced at it.

And now the time has come when we are to return to our Rectory home. The "Dark House of Trelgelthie" will know us no more after to-morrow; and the heather-covered moors will be a thing of memory only. My heart feels sad, I scarcely know why, as I take my solitary walk for the last time along the rocky path by the river, and watch it dashing along in its headlong course over the huge stones at my feet. Lily is to be married at Christmas, and then she and her husband will go abroad till the London season begins. It will be lonely at the Rectory without her bright face and winning ways. The villagers all love Lily; I can never hope to supply her place to them. Mr. Oliphant has gone away to Edinburgh for a few days; unless he comes back to-day, we shall not see him again. He and I have never met since the day of the drive to Craige, for I caught a cold which kept me to my room for more than a week; and then he went away. I feel very sorry for him; Lily had no business to encourage him as she did, and then throw him over without a moment's warning. She deserves to be treated in the same manner herself.

I work myself up into an angry heat as I walk along the beaten path on the mountain side; the river is far below me now—I can see it only by stretching my neck over the precipice; but its sound comes to me still, loud as before. Something also mingles with the sound now, a measured tramp of footsteps, whether before or behind I cannot tell, till a sudden turn in the road brings me face to face with Geoffrey Oliphant. He looks surprised, then pleased, while I flush crimson and come to a standstill.

"This is a very unexpected pleasure!" Mr. Oliphant says, holding out his hand. "I did not think any one ventured this way, especially ladies."

"I never care much what ladies do," I reply, laughing—it is so good to see him again, even though he cares for Lily—"and this is a favorite walk of mine."

"Well, you must not go any farther, it looks as black as thunder overhead; we shall have a storm presently."

I lift my eyes to the sky; it certainly looks very threatening, and I feel a rain-drop or two on my face. He is right, I must not go any farther, and yet a *tele-a-tele*

walk with him is not at all desirable for my peace of mind. However, there is no help for it, and we walk on together. For some minutes the conversation is on strictly general topics, the weather, our going away, and Mr. Oliphant's future plans. He is going abroad, he tells me, with some old college-friends. I murmur a hope that he will enjoy himself, to which he replies that he is sure to do that.

"Lily is to be married at Christmas," I venture to say.

"So Archer tells me. Lucky fellow that! I wish I were going to be married at Christmas, and to the girl I love."

"You can't both of you have her," I retort snappishly.

"Certainly not; that would not suit me at all," he says coolly—"would it?"

He looks down at me with a quizzical expression; but I am cross, and will not answer.

"Archer has invited me to be best man," Mr. Oliphant goes on; "and you will be chief bridesmaid, I suppose?"

"Yes, unless I am married too."

"Just so—that is exactly what I was thinking."

"Why?"

I turn and face him as he walks a little behind me; he is certainly very provoking this afternoon. To my utter astonishment and dismay, he seizes my hands in his, holding them close to his breast, and stands looking at me, almost as if he loved me. I drop my eyes before his, and try to withdraw my hands; but he holds them fast.

"Mab," he says, "since that day on the plateau at Craige Pass, I have wanted to ask you a question. Do you think you could take me in Archer's place as your husband?" Had he asked me to take a flying leap with him into the roaring, dashing river at our feet, I could not have felt more amazed and bewildered. "You will think me presumptuous to put myself in his place," Mr. Oliphant continues; "but I will try to make you as happy as even he could have done."

"Don't!" I cry at last, struggling to release myself—"don't!"

He drops my hands and draws away from me.

"I might have known how you would take it," he says sadly. "Forgive me, Miss Gerard; I—"

"It is not that!" I exclaim, everything else forgotten in my eagerness to tell him that Sir Basil is nothing to me. "I never cared for him—never, or he for me. You—heard what he said."

"Then, Mab, won't you marry me?"

He has come close to me again, and takes my hand in his. Poor fool that I am, the very sound of his voice makes me tremble and my heart beat to suffocation. Why cannot I tell him that I will have no man's cast-off love, that I will never marry a man who loves another woman? But I cannot; and, when he puts his arm round me and repeats his tender question, accompanying it with an expression of endearment sweet to listen to from his lips, pride, dignity, and womanly reserve forsake me, and, throwing myself upon his breast, I cling to him and sob out the words he waits to hear. Surely he must love me a little—else why does he strain me so close to his heart, why are his kisses so tender, his words so loving? I will not think of the future. Lily is going to be married—he cannot have her now; and I will be happy in the present till the shadows come, and life's bright dawn of joy be turned to darkness and despair. Never again will life look to me as it does now, so gloriously beautiful. I often think of this day in after-years, of the wild romantic scenery, the dashing river, and the noble form of my lover, as he walks by my side down the mountain-path, speaking tender words of love—words to which I listen as though they were a message from Heaven and he an angel from the seraphic throng. Ah, love's young dream is sweet indeed! I had never thought to be so happy as I am now, and yet my future husband has been my sister's lover!

CHAPTER IV.

And so Lily and I return to our Rectory home, and spend the short space of time which remains to us before our marriage in taking farewell of the parish and distributing last gifts of clothing and Christmas coals among the aged villagers who have been our *protéges* from our earliest child-