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MY GEORGIE.

I have been asked to tell the story; but, if I tell it at all, it must be in my own way. I'm an old woman now, and if I ramble and mander at times, why, perhaps you would do the same if you were sixty years old. It wasn't necessary to use through a millstone to see that one of the girls loved him with her whole heart, while the other— But there I have got into the middle of the story, and haven't told you the beginning yet.

There wasn't any great harm in Ida—I believe that thoroughly—but the child was too much of a kitten to know her own mind. Pretty? Oh yes, very pretty, even to my old eyes; just the sort of beauty that old age likes, with plenty of light and color about it—great soft dark eyes, and heaps of dark tangled hair, and the bloom of the damask rose on her soft oval cheeks. She was a good little thing in the main, but fanciful and flighty and capricious as a will-o'-the-wisp, and with a whole store-house of romance treasured up in her foolish little brain. It was really as good as a play to see that dainty, luxurious little creature sitting there in her silks and laces, talking about self-sacrifice and the pleasure of working and economizing for the man one loved. Work and economy, forsooth! and she knew about as much of either as a mollusk does of algebra. Not that I know what a mollusk is—Heaven forbid!—but it seems to be the fashion now to talk the most of what you understand the least. Yes, Ida was a nice little thing, bright and good-natured, and generous in an impulsive, open-handed way; but, bless you, she had about as much power of loving in her as a kitten. She could like people and be fond of them, and all that sort of thing, as long as everything was smooth and pleasant; but at the first touch of adversity—puff! her little ruslet-light of love was out with a whiff, instead of burning up clearer and stronger and fiercer for the blast, as it ought to do if it were the right sort.

What is the use of being hard upon the child, though, for what she could no more help than she could the mole upon her cheek, which troubled her so? Love is a gift and a talent, like any other. Some people have it and some people haven't, and whether it is a gift to be prayed for or not is a question my poor old brain cannot pretend to settle. I believe in it yet, old as I am, and I believe in insanity, but it's precious little I've seen of either the one or the other. They say we are all crazy, more or less, only in most people it never comes out very strong, and perhaps, its much the same with love. I suppose most of us have more or less of the commodity lying about us, ready to be squandered on anybody that comes along. People in general are satisfied to dribble it out, here a little and there a little, until it is all gone, and nobody the better for it—or the worse. Once in a while, though, you come across somebody who has hoarded up the whole stock, and kept it intact until the one comes along who claims it all. Is that the better way? I'm sure I can't tell. It all depends upon who comes in for it at the end.

Ida was one of that kind, I think; a little mite of a creature, with none of Ida's brightness or bloom about her, but taking, in her way, too, with a look of quiet resolution about the square chin and firm little mouth, and the wistful yearning spirit that seemed always peeping out of the blue-grey eyes. Soft brown hair, and a fair, quiet little face that would wake up and sparkle with life when any one was stirred or amused here—that was Georgie; both of the girls thought they loved him. And what there was about him that was so wonderful, so fully attractive I never could see. A good-looking young fellow enough, tall and manly, with a brown moustache, and a clear frank look, and his brown eyes. You see him dressed as good as every day, and what there was about him—Well, well, girls are mysterious, and very different from what they were when I was young. They didn't consider it proper to talk, or even to think, about such things. We took the good things as they came, and never vexed our heads about any "wight here be." That's what I did, and I'm none the worse for it now. Perhaps, though, if Georgie's father—But that is all over, and done with long ago. Sometimes I think, though, that that may be the reason I love the girl, though she is my own niece.

But here I am mandering on about my own views and my own thoughts and my own feelings, and haven't told you who they all are. Yet, Ida, you see, is my niece—Ida Merton, my brother's only child. Georgie is Georgie Gresham, a distant connection of Ida's who lives in the house, but supports herself by giving music lessons. Such a patient, plucky, indomitable little mite as she is, trudging out

in all weathers, and coming back pale and tired, but with never a complaint from her little lips, and always with a bright smile and cheerful word for "Aunt Jennie," as she so calls me. I believe the child really does love me; and so does Ida, only hers is a different sort of love. You feel that if you were away, Ida would love a stick, or stone, or any thing that might happen to be in your place; but Georgie would never forget you—never. The young man is Mark Drayton, and he is only a clerk in my brother's store, but for all that, he is of good birth and breeding. The wheel of fortune has strange ups and downs, and he was glad enough of the place when Mr. Merton sought it out and offered it to him, in memory of early benefits which he had received from young Drayton's father. Neither of them had any reason to regret the step, for Mark had proved to be steady and honorable, with rare flashes of what was almost like a genius for business, if there can be such a thing. He had risen steadily, until it was quite understood that next year he was to be a partner in the large wholesale and retail dry goods house of Merton and Co. All things considered, he would not have been such a bad match for Ida, only that I knew the child did not care about him, and there was Georgie breaking her proud, patient little heart for his sake, and nobody saw it but one old woman, who had been through it all herself, and knew what it meant. It was hard enough for her sometimes, but she was not the one to fret or bemoan herself.

Of course the young man was caught by Ida's wiferies, for the little puss was as fond of admiration as a cat is of sparrows, and spared no pains to fascinate him. I wonder that the two girls continued as good friends as they did; but I think Georgie saw that Ida was not really to blame, and was only acting out her nature, in perfect ignorance of the deadly hurt which she was inflicting upon her friend. For though Georgie had told her of her long, long friendship with Mark Drayton when he was only a poor struggling clerk, she had never told of the looks and words and ways with which he had won away her heart before either of them knew it. Not that the young man was dishonorable either. She had been his only friend in those days, you see. That was while her widowed mother was still living and Georgie was living with her. It was not till after her mother died that the girl came to Mr. Merton's house. Sympathy and friendship are very sweet, and Georgie had been patient and tender and true, and the young man had learned to think of her as a sister, and perhaps almost to love her as something more, but it all seemed so hopeless that he never spoke. And then he met Ida, any was dazzled and bewitched by her, and so Georgie was eclipsed for a while—only for a while. I felt sure, if he and Ida could be kept from committing themselves until both had had time to wake up from their foolish dream.

The evening, though, I began to fear that the rash young things would take matters into their own hands. Mark always did run about the house like a tame cat; there were few evenings that did not find him in our drawing-room. No doubt it was very good for the young man, and kept him out of a great deal of mischief, but I could not help thinking sometimes that he was not the only one to be considered. That evening Ida exerted all her witchery. Such a bright, sparkling little puss as she was when she chose! It was not what she said; that was well enough in its way, but neither remarkably wise nor witty, but so enforced and pointed by droopings of the long lashes, and pointing of the red lips, and flashing of the dark eyes, and fluttering of the little white hands, that even an old woman like me could not help forgetting for a while what nonsense she was saying, and being carried away and captivated and fascinated in spite of herself. And all the while my little Georgie sat there, with her pale face and her gentle quiet ways and her quaint little words, just the same as ever, for anything they could see. And if I fancied now and then that there was a quick catching of her breath or a passing contraction of her pretty forehead, why, perhaps it was only my fancy. I tried to think so, at all events.

Presently they began to talk of the opera, and Ida declared, with her pretty hand clasped, that she adored Nilsson. Didn't Mr. Drayton think she was just divine? And oh! what would she give to see her in *Faust*? Somehow she had never seen her in it, and she was sure she must be a perfect Marguerite. Did Mr. Drayton know that that was the opera for to-morrow night, and perhaps that might be the last time it would be given?

And Ida stopped, with her hands still clasped and her eyes fixed on the young man. I declare I could have boxed her pretty pink ears, Georgie could not have done it; but then,

things that would have seemed forward and unamiable in other girls, in Ida seemed so simple and artless and unconscious that you could not be disgusted with her.

Of course there was nothing for Mr. Drayton to do but to say that he would be delighted to escort her. I caught one swift glance from Georgie's eyes, and then I remembered that he was to have taken her on that very evening to hear a celebrated pianist who was setting the whole city wild; but Georgie did not speak, and was only a friend and a sister, and must learn to be quietly put aside when others claimed his services. Perhaps the young man's conscience smote him a little, for he was unusually gentle and attentive in his ways to Georgie that evening, and I heard him say:

"You know, Georgie, that he will be here for some time, and any night will do for him, but Nilsson may not appear as Marguerite again."

"Oh yes, it is all right. I quite understand," said Georgie; and if his ear was not quick enough to detect the little quiver in her voice, nor his eye sharp enough to see the flutter of her lip, though my old eyes and ears could perceive both, whose fault was that?

Love is blind, they say; but a calm, friendly indifference is blinder than any mole.

I scarcely saw Georgie the next day, but Ida was in and out, bright and blithe as usual. When the evening came, both the girls were in the drawing room. Ida was radiant. Her dress was of black silk, but all tricked off with soft fine laces, with flecks of scarlet here and there. Scarlet flecks nodded in her hair and dropped at her dainty throat. Georgie looked like a pale shadow beside her, in her soft grey dress, unrelieved by a single dash of color, but, to my eyes, so sweet and fair in her rare, quiet composure.

Well, the evening crept slowly on, and Ida grew impatient, flashing lither and thither in her quick, restless way, while Georgie, half hidden in the shadow of the curtains, knitted on steadily at some piece of soft fleecy work, apparently unmoved. The carriage had been waiting at the door for an hour, and still no sign of Mark.

Just as Ida was for the fortieth time appealing to us to know if it were not the strangest thing we ever heard of, the door opened, and Mr. Merton entered. A tall, well-looking man was this brother of mine, with silver hair and clear blue eyes, and the port and bearing of a gentleman of the old school, with the polished courtesy of that bygone class too, and the dignified calm which scarce anything could ruffle. So it startled us to see a shadow on his face which deepened after the quick glance which he cast around the room.

"What is the matter brother Paul?" I asked; and both girls looked up.

"I am vexed and puzzled," was his reply—a most unusual one for him, in case in hoping against hope to find Mark Drayton here. You have seen nothing of him?"

Mark Drayton! Ida listened in earnest, and even Georgie dropped her work. "It is a most perplexing thing," he went on. "I would stake my life on the young fellow's truth and honor; yet what can have become of him? A perfect hurricane of questions arose; only Georgie was silent as death in her obscure corner. As soon as Ida could be induced to listen and let the rest hear, brother Paul told his story.

How that in the morning a lady had entered the store, a lady regal in silks and furs, more regal in port and bearing, so brother Paul said, tall and fair, with great flashing hazel eyes, and hair of palest gold. How that this lady, after inspecting and lavishly ordering the richest and costliest goods, velvet, silks of every shade, laces—old point, Houlton, gaiters, Mechlin—enough to dress you from head to foot, had suddenly discovered that she had forgotten her purse and check-book. In sore perplexity, she had sent her card to Mr. Merton—Mrs. Lorraine Drayton was the name it bore—with a request for an interview. Explaining that she was obliged to leave town that afternoon, she begged him to send a trusty clerk in the carriage with her to receive and bring back the money.

"So," said brother Paul, in conclusion. "I asked Mark to go as a personal favor. It is hardly his business, but I thought I could trust him."

"Well, papa?" said Ida as he paused.

"Well, that is all," said brother Paul.

"All papa? but where is Mark?"

"Ah! that is the question. Since he entered the carriage with Mrs. Drayton, nothing has been seen of him. The sum was a large one, and whether he has yielded to the sudden temptation—but that is impossible. Yet you play, the only alter-

native, seems equally impossible. I have set the police on the track, but I am utterly baffled and bewildered."

I can not pretend to describe the scene that followed this announcement. I know that for a moment there was dead silence in the room. We were all, I think too much shocked and stunned to speak. Ida still stood in the middle of the floor, with a face from which every vestige of color had fled. Then Georgie came forward, and, as if her movement had snapped the spell, the silence broke up suddenly—questions, surmises, doubts, suspicions, set as fast as soon as formed, for none of us could really suspect of any evil doing the young man whom we had known so long and so well. But all came back to the one horrible, unanswerable question, Where could he be?

I can only tell the story from my own point of view, and there is no use in my trying to enter into the details of the police search, of the rewards offered, of the clues which they had found, but which invariably led to nothing. Had the earth opened and swallowed up Mark and that mysterious woman, they could not have disappeared more utterly. The detective system was a mystery just our comprehension, and we could do nothing but sit at home and wait, deluded with fresh hopes or sickened by fresh fears as day after day crept slowly on.

You understand that, apart from the horror of the mystery so suddenly thrust into our midst, my heart was wrung for Georgie, bearing her burden of anguish so patiently. Day by day her little face grew paler and thinner, and the wistful yearning look deepened in her eyes, and her lips were more firmly set in their resolute line. But I knew that her dread was only of his death; I knew that she had a doubt of his truth and honor had ever crossed her mind.

And how was it with Ida? The child, at first, was the most wretched of us, and yielded to her feelings without restraint. But when the first horrible shock was over—how shall I express it? I think the long misery of suspense bored her. She could never endure *ennui*, and sad and sickening as it may be, there is a certain drearful *ennui* in all protracted grief. She grew tired of it, tired of waiting and trying, tired of all of our sad faces, tired, most of all, of the long strain of grief on her light, careless nature. So at last it was really a relief to her to open her ears to the rumors and suspicions which circulated among those who did not know Mark as we did. It justified her in casting aside the show of sadness, which had already ceased to be anything but a show, and when a doubt was once entertained, it was easy for it to become a settled, angry conviction.

Well, time passed on, as it always does, whether its feet falls on roses or on breaking hearts. We were all collected in the drawing room. How well I remember the scene! The room was lighted only by the wood fire, which sent its fine flickers wavering over floor and ceiling. Georgie sat on a low ottoman. How thin her face looked as the bright lights and deep shadows chased each other across it! She was dressed in black, but on, perhaps, poor child! as a silent emblem of the sorrow that had almost died into hopelessness. Ida was at the other side of the room, talking to young Somerly, who had dropped in, just as she used to talk to Mark, with the same pretty gestures, the same arch reflections, the same soft, ringing laughter. How could she? But it was the child's nature. I dared not forget that, or I should have hated her for her fickleness and heartiness.

Suddenly the door into the hall opened. And who stood there, a black figure sharp and defined against the glare of light? For an instant we all sat mute and motionless, uncertain, I think, whether it was a ghost or not. For we had become so sure of Georgie and I, that he was dead, you see, though neither of us had breathed the suspicion to the other, nor would we have acknowledged it had we been taxed with it. For an instant we sat so, and then with a low cry of "Mark! oh, Mark! is it you at last?" Georgie sprang forward, her face all lighted up with eager joy and triumph.

But he? He scarcely noticed her—my poor little Georgie! just took her hand mechanically as he peered into the shadow.

"Ida!" I exclaimed, sharply, for the child had never stirred, though she saw him well enough.

Then she came forward slowly and reluctantly. I think she was frightened, for she bated tragically every fibre of her nature, and she had been living in the midst of it for two weeks, and now its culmination in bodily shape stood before her. She did not know what to do. The kitten had nothing in her nature to enable her to rise to the level of such a crisis as this. She

just stood before him, with eyes half-drooping, half-awakened, but with fear and suspicion and distrust written so legibly on every feature that the young man must have been blind indeed not to read that silent language. Not a word of welcome, not a question as to where he had been, nothing but that confused, blushing silence which the most easily deluded lover could never have mistaken for the timidity of love and joy. I think Mark was bewildered at first, but as he stood and gazed at her, gradually the meaning of it all grew plain to him, and his expression changed. I saw the pride and calm contempt slowly rise and overflow his face, as it were, as a wave may spread slowly over a low flat when the tide comes in. There was no anger in his look, no resentment. He seemed only like one who awakens slowly from a pleasant dream and realizes that it was but a dream. And then—then he turned to my Georgie at last, and over his face there came a glow and a light such as I had never seen there before, as he said, simply:

"But Georgie believed in me."

And he went to him and wept her heart away in his encircling arms, and I drew Ida softly away and left them. Young Somerly had had sense enough to take himself off before. So Georgie had won not much of a prize after all, to my thinking; but if she was satisfied, that was all that was necessary.

Of course I was dying to hear Mark's story, but I had not the heart to intrude upon them. When he did tell it at last, it seemed more like a crazy dream than a sober, matter-of-fact episode of the nineteenth century. When he got into the carriage with Mrs. Drayton, she it seems, began to talk in so brilliant and fascinating a manner that he did not notice the direction in which they were driving until they stopped before a large building, which he recognized as the lunatic asylum. Requesting him to wait for a few minutes, as she had business inside, she left him. Shortly afterwards she was greeted politely by the doctor in charge, who came to the carriage and addressing him as Mr. Drayton, requested him to step out for a minute. Mark disclaimed the name but for this Dr. Langley was prepared, as Mrs. Drayton had told him that her husband was the victim of a strange hallucination, believing himself a clerk in the house of Merton and Co., and giving his name as Mark Drayton. Recognizing the trap set for him, Mark, by his own account, lost his head for the moment, knocked down one or two of the men who advanced to seize him, and conducted himself generally so like a lunatic that there was no room for doubt of Mrs. Drayton's story in any mind. Of course he was overpowered at last and taken into the building, catching a glimpse as he passed of Mrs. Drayton in an attitude of bitter but most becoming grief. She had taken the precaution to pay his board a month in advance, thus securing his detention long enough to allow her to escape with her booty. As time went on and he became calmer, his entreaties to be confronted with Mr. Merton, which at first had been treated as mere ravings, began to make more impression. At last Dr. Langley meeting Mr. Merton accidentally, mentioned the circumstance, and the result of course, was Mark's release.

So there is my story, and if it is not artistically handled, why, I am an old woman, as I told you, and not used to such things. To me the chief interest centred in Georgie, and if I have made her the principle figure, and rather slurred over Mark's adventures, it is partly for that reason and partly because, beyond the bare outline, we could not get much out of him. He had suffered too much, I suppose, during his incarceration to let his mind drop upon it willingly. Mrs. Drayton was never traced; but whenever we take up a paper and read of a successful swindling operation, we look at each other and wonder, "Was it she?"

Georgie and Mark are very happy, if we may judge by appearances, and I think we may. Ida has outgrown her suspicions, and Mark has forgiven her for them, but he old glamour is gone forever, which is very fortunate for all concerned. And if Ida and young Somerly should come to terms, why, I think it will be a very good thing. For there are no heights in the nature of either after which the other must strain in vain.

So my task is done, and now I can lay down my pen and take my rest by the north window we have sat, Georgie and I, so many times, and where we have both dreamed our dreams—I of a darkened past, she of a darkened future. We dream them no more; and if her future is bright, I see beyond and above a future for me which is bright with a brightness that earth can never give.



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