

for heaven had sent me friends, friends who were only too happy to aid me.

"Well, I need not weary your ear with a recital of all my industrious strivings during the early portion of my professional career. Year after year went over my head, and I was still in a strolling company, as yet, unable to climb up higher, to attain the position I was endeavoring to reach.

"I felt that I had talents, and I was yearning to display them where they might have a chance of being properly appreciated. I was a woman now, and I was full of ambitious aspirations.

"At length fortune brought me what I so much desired. A London manager, who was searching in the provinces for some novel plant worthy of being removed to a richer soil, seeing me act, and approving of my style, engaged me to lead the business in his theatre in town.

"I was in ecstasies at the prospect now before me; and when my *début* was over, and my success established in London, I did not seem to have another object to desire. I soon became a universal favorite with the public, and I was as happy as a queen.

"The Thetfords were quite proud of my good fortune, and so, likewise, was worthy Samuel Jellico. I had a handsome salary (Mr. Jellico took care of that important matter for me), which finding I was unable to spend it, I husbanded carefully, and allowed to accumulate.

"I need not narrate to you any more of my doings, as I have nothing to rehearse to you but a long list of Fortune's favors. You see my present position, therefore I need not explain it in any superfluous words.

"And now, Desmoro, I have done."

"I am glad to hear as much," he returned, in a most significant manner. In his secret heart, he had been quaking lest she might have some little love-episodes to relate to him, some delicate confession to make as regarded her own particular self. Comfort was a very lovely woman, and he had fully prepared himself to hear that she had a whole host of lovers in her train of general and enthusiastic admirers. But no word or syllable had she breathed on the subject of love or lovers, and, consequently, Desmoro's mind was much relieved on that point.

"Were her affections really free, and would he ever be able to win those affections?" he asked himself over and over again, as he sat in her presence, watching her every look, and longing to tell her how he cared for her in the years gone by, and how the old feeling for her had come back into his breast.

Talking about themselves, they sat together several hours, taking no heed whatever of the flight of time.

Desmoro inquired after Jellico's whereabouts. "Oh, he has retired from the stage," returned Comfort, with some slight embarrassment, "he had become quite a victim to the rheumatism."

"I am sorry to hear that," rejoined Desmoro, sincerely; "and, at the same time, I rejoice that he had the means to withdraw from his labors. I thought he was poor, I am glad to find that I was mistaken."

Comfort colored a little at this, but she made no reply; she was far too generous and noble-minded to let any one know that Samuel Jellico, her somewhat manager, was a pensioner on her bounty. The deeds of charity performed by the actress were never paraded before the eyes of the public, never permitted to be whispered abroad. Whatever gifts she bestowed, were bestowed with such delicacy and feeling, that the recipient of her bounty almost forgot the amount of the obligation so gracefully conferred upon him. Comfort had known much scant and want herself, and, consequently, her heart was full of tender sympathy for the wants of others.

CHAPTER LI.

After this, Desmoro lived for a purpose: he lived to love Comfort, to love her with all the warmth and devotion of his ardent nature. The Colonel saw how matters were progressing with his son, and, having been made acquainted with the object of Desmoro's affections, and approving of that object, he was quite delighted, and ready to receive Comfort as his son's wife.

Desmoro sought Comfort daily, but as yet he had not made any proposal of marriage to her; nay, he had not even hinted at such a subject; he was dreading to do so lest she should refuse him. Had he possessed an honest name, could he but have offered her a hand pure as her own, he would not have hesitated at asking her to become his. With Marguerite d'Auvergne his case had worn an altogether different aspect. To a certain extent she had encouraged Desmoro's attentions, at the same time showing him that she felt more than a common interest in him and his welfare. She had fascinated and bewildered his feelings, and his gratitude towards her had begotten in him a strong love, which, in a bosom so innately honorable as his, would never have diminished or known any change. In other words, had Marguerite lived to plight with him her solemn vows at the altar, she would never have regretted that she had done so. But heaven, whose decrees none can avert, had willed matters otherwise.

Desmoro now went abroad with less fear than heretofore. He lived wholly apart from the world at large, an anchorite kind of existence quite, it would have been, but for the society of Comfort. He had almost forgotten the fact of having an enemy somewhere. Desmoro had evaded his old foe for so long a period, that he was now feeling tolerably secure.

Well, months fled, and Desmoro still faltered—still held back from making any positive avowal of his love to Comfort.

She did not comprehend his strange reticence, and marvelled much that he did not openly declare his intentions towards her. She knew his feelings as well as if such had been spoken in words to her, but, notwithstanding that, she was not quite contented.

Just at this time, a very wealthy man fell in love with Comfort, and there and then offered her his hand.

Comfort showed Desmoro the gentleman's letters to her, and, in order to test the sincerity of his feelings, and to draw him into a declaration of them, she pretended to ask his counsel concerning the offer she had just received.

Desmoro changed color, and began to stammer a good deal, quite at a loss how to answer her.

Comfort observed his discomfiture, and she began to grow somewhat vexed with him for his lack of proper courage at such a time, when she had given him every opportunity to speak to her on a subject to which she wished to listen.

"The offer is a very excellent one in every respect, is it not?" quivered Desmoro, his face white as a linen cloth.

"Y-e-s," returned Comfort drawingly, her heart suddenly sinking in her breast. "Mr. Manton is very rich, indeed."

Desmoro winced, and for some seconds neither spoke.

"But I haven't any liking for the gentleman," said Comfort, the first to break the painful silence that had fallen upon them.

Desmoro looked up, and his features, over which a deep flush had spread, quivered and twitched.

"And it would not be just towards an honorable man to deceive him in any way, would it?" proceeded she, narrowly watching her companion while she spoke.

"No," dropped he, falteringly.

"No; I have been thinking as much."

Then there again ensued a lengthy pause—a pause which Desmoro feared to break, lest he should lose his self-control and let loose his feelings.

While affairs were in this situation between our two lovers, the Colonel entered Comfort's dwelling, and was ushered into the presence of the embarrassed pair, the expression of whose face at once informed the Colonel that something was wrong with their owners.

He looked from one to the other; then asked what was the matter.

This question, so abrupt, confused our friends more and more.

"Nothing at all was the matter," Comfort at last replied, her lips quivering while she spoke, and a sickly smile relaxing her features.

Desmoro bit his lips and fidgeted with his feet. By-and-by he said, "Comfort has just had an offer of marriage, and she has been asking my advice upon the subject."

The above words were delivered in hollow, tremulous accents.

"Comfort has had an offer of marriage?" repeated the Colonel, in accents of surprise and bewilderment. "May I ask from whom?" he added, glancing first at Desmoro, and then at Comfort, who was sitting absently looking at her folded hands, which were lying in her lap.

No one answered, and the Colonel repeated his question, at which Comfort pointed to an open letter, which the Colonel took up, and silently perused.

"Ah, I understand now!" he said, coldly, scarcely comprehending anything about the matter, notwithstanding his words. "Um! and how have you decided—eh?"

Comfort shrugged her shoulders, and made no reply.

"Eh?" queried the Colonel, anxious to hear what her intentions were; whether she purposed becoming Mrs. Manton or Mrs. Somebody Else. "Well?" he went on, finding she did not answer him, "you have not yet informed me?"

Still no rejoinder from her.

"Are we to be left in ignorance quite of your intentions?" continued he in a half-laughing manner, at the same time advancing towards her, and laying his fatherly hand on her shoulder.

"Come, what say you?"

"I have nothing whatever to say," responded she, full of embarrassment, and in the most awkward manner possible.

"Nothing to say!" echoed the Colonel, elevating his eyebrows. "Ah, I suppose I am asking too much in thus requesting your confidence?"

"No, not at all!" was her confused response. He gazed at her, amazement in all his looks; but she still maintained her former manner, which was full of strangeness and mystery.

At this moment Desmoro started up, and began to restlessly pace the room to and fro. The Colonel remarked his excited state, and so also did Comfort, although she was looking as demure as she possibly could, and as if she were not remarking anything that was passing around her.

If Desmoro were uncomfortable and unhappy at this moment, so likewise was she, although she did not show that she was particularly moved in any way. Her face was, perhaps, somewhat paler than usual, and that was all the sign of emotion she betrayed.

"We are to have a wedding, I suppose?" the Colonel said, at length, scarcely knowing what to say.

Comfort shook her head, negatively.

"No?"

"No, indeed, Colonel," answered she, turning her head aside, her cheeks burning and red.

"Not between Mr. Manton and yourself, you

mean?" the Colonel added, in a significant tone, glancing at Desmoro in a sly manner.

"Yes; of course, I meant as much," she replied.

"Ah, now I am beginning to comprehend matters," pursued the Colonel, laughingly. "But this Mr. Manton is extremely wealthy, is he not?"

"I believe he is," half pouted Comfort, wishing in her heart that the Colonel would change the subject, and talk about something else.

"Do you not think that his offer deserves some serious consideration on your part?"

"No."

"Oh, surely, yes."

"Wherefore should I bestow consideration on a matter in which I feel not the slightest interest?"

"Perhaps you are averse to the notion of matrimony?" the Colonel further queried. She flushed and bit her lips. His question had been much too abrupt and pointed. But he was thinking of his son, and dreading lest he loved hopelessly, and he thought the present time too valuable to let slip by.

"Now is the moment," thought the Colonel, fully determined to make use of his opportunity. "I will learn at once whether or not she cares for Desmoro."

But he found that there was much difficulty in carrying out his project, that it was easier to make a resolution than to fulfil it.

Desmoro himself, being present at the time, caused the Colonel much embarrassment and trouble. But the subject was already broached, and so it would be just as well to proceed with it, and endeavor to learn what he was wishing to learn. He loved his son dearly, and his most earnest, earthly desire was to see that son made happy.

Colonel Symure could quite comprehend wherefore Desmoro had refrained from avowing his feelings, and from proposing to Comfort. Desmoro, he knew, felt his painful position most keenly, and was afraid to ask Comfort to share with him his blighted existence.

The Colonel sighed, as he reflected that it was through his means that his son owned a crushed life. But the past was without remedy; and in the present, Colonel Symure desired to make amends for that past.

He lifted up his eyes, and to his surprise and delight, perceived that Desmoro had left the room, or rather, that he had retired to an inner one, and was there absently standing at a window, gazing into a green square before the house.

The Colonel rubbed his hands, and glanced at Comfort, who was sitting near a table, listlessly turning over the leaves of a book before her. She was looking disturbed, and now much paler than her wont.

The Colonel nervously hemmed once or twice; then he drew his chair a little closer to Comfort, and hemmed again. But she did not pretend to take any notice of him, she still bent over the pages of her book.

"Comfort," said he, in a low voice, again drawing his chair nearer to hers.

She closed the book, and turned towards him.

"Yes, Colonel," she replied. "You have learned to regard me with almost the feelings of a daughter, have you not, Comfort?" pursued he, looking into her face, and addressing her in gentle accents.

"I like you very much," she answered, very simply, "for you are Desmoro's father."

"Who would be proud to become yours also, Comfort," he rejoined, quickly and pointedly.

She made no rejoinder; she was trembling in every limb, and her heart was palpitating wildly.

"Give me a right to call you daughter, Comfort," he added, suddenly seizing one of her hands.

"I do not understand you," faltered she.

"No?"

"No, indeed, Colonel."

He shook his head, doubtfully.

"You do not credit me, Colonel, eh?"

"I should be rude to tell you as much, should I not? At all events you would deem me so."

"Probably, I should."

"You are a woman; one not deficient in woman's shrewdness."

"Well?"

"You have eyes, and you have seen," added the Colonel, his tones full of meaning.

She was silent for some few seconds, she had not courage to reply to him at the moment.

"I don't quite understand you, Colonel," she returned, very demurely.

"Oh, Comfort, Comfort!" laughed he, reprovingly, "you know that Desmoro loves you," he continued, sinking his voice into a whisper.

"He loves me?" quivered she, her face all aglow with sudden joy. "Does Desmoro really care for me, Colonel?" she went on, fluttering with pleasurable emotion.

"Can you question that fact, Comfort?" asked Desmoro himself, suddenly appearing at her side.

She started up in sudden tremor, and her color went and came.

The Colonel rose, and, unperceived, slipped out of the room. And now Desmoro was left to plead his own cause, which he did so effectually, that Comfort soon consented to become his wife.

Desmoro's heart was now filled with joy and happiness; the dearest wish of his life was about to be accomplished, and bright sunshine beamed in upon his soul.

Miss Chavring had taken her leave of the public, the wedding-day was fixed, and everything was in preparation for the celebration of

the anticipated and blissful event, when one day, as Desmoro and his affianced bride were slowly driving round Hyde Park, an uncouth figure suddenly started up before them, and was nearly run over.

"Confound you! cannot you see the horses?" said Desmoro, at once pulling up his horses.

"Holloa!" cried the man, who had staggered backwards a few paces. "Why, darn my buttons, if it beant Red Hand!"

At the mention of that terrible soubriquet, Desmoro cast a scared glance at the speaker, and then, lashing his beasts, dashed onwards at a furious speed, heedless of whither he was proceeding.

"What is the matter?" inquired his companion.

"It was he," answered Desmoro.

"He! Whom?"

"That villain, Pidgers," Desmoro rejoined.

"Pidgers!" repeated she, in affright. "Oh, drive on faster, faster, Desmoro!" she continued, urging him on, and casting hurried looks behind her. "I see him—I see him hastening after us! Let us leave the park, and proceed home by a circuitous route!"

"Have no fear, dearest, we shall be out of his reach directly. The miscreant cannot run as fast as my pair of horses."

Nor could he; for soon the wretch gave up the chase, and stood still, gaping after the equipage containing Desmoro and Comfort.

"Caught agin, an' missed, agin, arter such a long hunt arter him!" cried Pidgers, sinking on one of the park seats. "In coorse, I may as well sit down yere, as do ought else at present, seeln' as how my pair of legs would never be able to overtake you two beasts he's drivin' of; an' she, too, I knowed her in a instant, as soon as ever I clapped my two eyes on her—she, Miss Comfort Shavings, all friendly wée the thief. He hev' gotten her to hisself at last, I reckons; blister him! Well, whaten am I to do, whaten would it be best fur me to do? I must see him hanged, I've sworn to do so, an' I means to keep my oath in this piece of business, if I never keeps a oath agin!"

And Pidgers clenched his fingers tightly, and muttered curses many as he brooded over his wicked intentions.

While he was thus sitting, he removed his cap from his heated brow, and wiped his face. Just as he was about to replace his head-covering, a strong grip was laid upon his shoulder; and, looking up, Pidgers saw the resolute countenance of Captain Williams.

Pidgers uttered a terrified cry, and tried to shake off the Captain's hold.

"You miserable rascal, I've caught you at last, have I?" exclaimed the latter. "Don't budge, or I'll crush you with a single blow; I will, by heaven!"

"Let me goo, let me goo!" struggled Pidgers, with all his might.

But Captain Williams' clutch was not to be shaken off or disturbed. Pidgers was being held as in a vice, and he plunged and kicked quite uselessly.

Presently a little crowd gathered around the Captain and his ungalnily-looking prisoner, and several policemen appearing, the Captain gave Pidgers in charge, and he was immediately secured and borne away to prison.

On the following evening, Captain Williams presented himself at the residence of Colonel Symure, and requesting to see that gentleman or his son, he was at once ushered into their presence.

Desmoro took his visitor's hand almost silently, and so, likewise, did the Colonel. Both the gentlemen looked oppressed and unhappy.

The Captain seated himself. The expression of his visage betokened that he was the bearer of some important intelligence.

"I regret that we can give you only a sorry welcome, Captain," said the Colonel, with a deep sigh.

"What is the matter?" queried the sailor, looking first at the Colonel then at Desmoro.

"Our house is again full of trouble, Captain," answered the Colonel.

"How's that, my friend; what on earth has happened?"

"That wretch Pidgers has again crossed our path."

"Is that all?" cried the sailor, lightly.

"All! is it not enough?"

"Set your minds at rest; Pidgers will never annoy you more."

"How?" exclaimed Desmoro, starting up.

"What mean you?"

"The wretch is dead!" answered Captain Williams.

"Dead!" echoed the two gentlemen.

"Yes; he has committed suicide."

"Suicide!" repeated Desmoro.

"When and how?"

Captain Williams now hastened to inform his hearers how he had chanced upon Pidgers in the park, and of how he carried him off to prison; where, during the night, he unexpectedly died, apparently in great torments, and, as it was supposed, by poison, which the man must have had secreted somewhere about his person.

"And he is dead?" said Desmoro, scarcely able to credit the evidence of his ears, to believe that his bitter foe was no more.

"Yes; he is dead, sure enough," rejoined the Captain. "And, after the post-mortem examination, I shall be enabled to acquaint you through what means he is so."

Desmoro sat transfixed. This intelligence was so utterly unlooked-for by him, that he could not all at once bring himself to put faith in it. He felt like a man suddenly reprimed at the very foot of the gallows, and he was nearly