

The Bread and Butter Miss.

PART IV.

'Yes,' said Despard, 'as a sudden idea struck him. "If you happen to know my sister, Mrs. Selby, by sight, I'd be eternally grateful to you if you would tell her I'm going home. I'll wait for her at the old church, would you say?"

'Don't know her, but I'll find her out. Mrs. Selby, of Markers-leaf, I suppose? Well, take my advice, and keep on the shady side of the road.'

'I shall go through the woods, thank you. My sister will understand.'

With a friendly nod the young fellow went off.

Despard had been roused by the talk with him. He got up now and went slowly round to the back of the house—it was a place he had known in old days—thus avoiding all risk of coming across any of the guests. By a path behind the stables he made his way slowly into the woods, and in about half an hour's time he found himself where these ended at the high road, along which his sister must pass. There was a stile near, over which, through a field, lay a footpath to the church, and here on the style Mr. Norreys seated himself to await Mrs. Selby.

'I've managed that pretty neatly,' he said, 'trying to imagine he was feeling as usual. "I wonder who that fellow was. He seemed to have heard Maddie's name though he did not know her."

He was perfectly clear in his head now, but the pain in it was racking. He tried to think, but in vain. Clearer, and yet more clearly, stood out before his mind's eye the strange drama of that afternoon. And the more he thought of it, the more he looked at it, approaching it from every side, the more incapable he became of explaining Miss Ford's extraordinary conduct. The indignation which had at first blotted out all other feeling gradually gave way to his extreme perplexity.

'She had no sort of grounds for speaking to me as she did,' he reflected. 'Accusing me vaguely of unworthy motives—what could she mean?' Then a new idea struck him. 'Some one has been making mischief,' he thought; 'that must be it, though what and how, I cannot conceive. Gertrude Englewood would not do it intentionally—but still—I saw that she was changed to me. I shall have it out with her. After all, I hope Madeline's letter has gone.'

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And a vague, very faint hope began to make itself felt that perhaps, after all, all was not lost. If she had been utterly misled about him—if— He drew a deep breath, and looked round. It was the very sweetest moment of a summer's day existence, that at which late afternoon begins softly and silently to fade into early evening. There was an almost Sabbath stillness in the air, and a tender suggestion of night's approach, and from where Despard sat the white headstones of some graves in the ancient churchyard were to be seen among the grass. The man felt strangely moved and humbled.

'If I could hope ever to win her, he thought, 'I feel as if I had it in me to be a better man—I am not at all selfish and worldly, Malsie—surely not? But what has made her judge me so cruelly? It is awful to remember what she said, and to imagine what sort of an opinion she must have of me to have been able to say it. For—no, that was not my contemptible conceit—and his face flushed. "She was beginning to care for me. She is too generous to have remembered vindictively my insolence for insolence it was, at the first. Besides, she said herself that she had been getting to like and trust me as a friend. Till to-day—has the change in her all come from what I said to-day? No girl can despise a man for the fact of his caring for her—what can it be? Good heavens, I feel as if I should go mad!"

And he wished that the pain in his head, which had somewhat subsided would get worse again, if only it would stop his thinking. But just then came the sound of wheels. In another moment Mrs. Selby's pony carriage was in sight. Despard got off his stile, and walked slowly down the road to meet her. "So you faithless—" she began—for, to tell the truth, she had not attached much credence to the story which had reached her of the fearful headache—but she changed her tone the moment she caught sight of his face. "My poor boy, you do look ill!" she exclaimed. "I am so sorry. I would have come away at once if I had known."

"It doesn't matter," Despard replied, as he got into the carriage; "but did you get my message?"

"Oh, yes; but I thought it was just that you were tired and bored. What is the matter, dear Despard? You don't look the least like yourself."

"I fancy it was the sun this morning," he said. "But it is passing off, I think."

Madeline felt by no means sure that it was so.

"I am so sorry," she repeated, "and so vexed with myself. Do you know who the young man was that gave me your message?"

Despard shook his head.

"It was Mr. Conrad Florde, Lord Southwood's nephew and heir—at least to the title, but to little else."

"So I would suppose," said Norreys indifferently. "The Southwoods are very poor."

"How queer that he knew your name if you have never met him before," said Mrs. Selby. "But I dare say it's through the Flores-Carters; they're such great friends of mine, you know, and they are staying at

Laxter's Hill as well as the Southwood party.

'Yes,' Despard agreed, 'he had evidently heard of you.'

'And of you too in that case. People do so chatter in the country. The Carters are dying to get you there. They have got the Southwoods to promise to go to them next week. They—the Carter girls—are perfectly wild about Lady Margaret. I think it would be better taste not to make up to her so much; it does look as if it was because she was what she is, though I know it isn't really that. They get up these fits of enthusiasm. And she is very nice—not very pretty, you know, but wonderfully nice and unspoilt, considering.'

'Unspoilt,' repeated Despard. He was glad to keep his sister talking about indifferent matters. 'I don't see that poor Lord Southwood's daughter has any reason to be spoilt.'

'Oh, dear yes—didn't you know? I thought you knew everything of that kind. It appears that she is a tremendous heiress; I forgot the figures. The fortune comes from her mother's husband. Her mother's elder sister married an enormously wealthy man, and as they had no children or son relations on his side, he left all to this girl. Of course she and her father have always known it, but it has been kept very quiet. They lived in the country six months of the year, and travelled the other six. She has been most carefully brought up and splendidly educated. But she has never been "out" in society at all till this year.'

'I never remembered hearing of them in town,' said Despard.

'Oh, Lord Southwood himself never goes out. He is dreadfully delicate—heart disease, I think. But she—Lady Margaret—will be heard of now. It has all come out about her fortune now that she has come into the title. His cousin, the last earl, only died two months ago.'

'And,' said Despard, with a strange sensation, as if he was listening to some one else speaking rather than speaking himself, 'till he can enter the title, what was he called? He was the last man's cousin, you say?'

'Yes, of course; he was Mr. Florde—Florde with two "f"s and an "e," you know. It's the family name of the Southwoods. That young man—the one you spoke of—is Mr. Conrad Florde, as I told you. They say that—'

But a glance at her brother made her hesitate.

'Despard, is your head worse?' she asked anxiously.

'It comes on by fits and starts,' he replied. 'But don't mind; go on speaking. What are you going to say?'

'Oh, only about young Mr. Florde. They say he is to marry Lady Margaret; they are only second cousins. But I don't think he looks good enough for her. She seems such a womanly, nice-feeling girl. We had just been introduced when Mr. Florde came up with your message and she wanted him to go back to you at once. But he said you would be gone already, and I—well, I didn't quite believe about your head being so bad, and perhaps I seemed very cool about it, for Lady Margaret really looked quite vexed. Wasn't it nice of her? The Carters had been telling her about us evidently. I think she was rather disappointed not to see the famous Despard Norreys, do you know?'

She turned round, her eyes sparkling with excitement and eagerness. But there was no response in Mr. Norreys' face; on the contrary, his expression was such that Mrs. Selby's own face grew pale with dread.

'Despard,' she said, 'why do you look like that? You are not going to say that now, because she is an heiress—just because of money,' with a tone of supreme contempt, that you will give it up? You surely—'

But Mr. Norreys interrupted her. 'Has the letter gone, Maddie?'

She nodded her head.

'Then I must write again at once—myself—to Gertrude Englewood to make her promise on her honour never to tell what you wrote—even if I thought she would believe it—and I am not sure that she would—I could never allow myself to be cleared in her eyes now.'

Madeline stared at him. Had the sunstroke affected his brain?

'Despard,' she said, 'what do you mean?'

He turned his haggard face toward her.

'I don't know how to tell you,' he said. 'I wish I need not, but as you know so much I must. I did see her, Madeline. I met her when I was strolling about the shrubbery over there. She was quite alone and nobody near. It seemed to have happened on purpose, and I told her all.'

'You proposed to her?'

He nodded.

(To be continued.)

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I rather wonder you never met her this summer in town, though perhaps you would scarcely have remarked her just as Miss Florde, for she isn't—'

But an exclamation from Despard startled her.

'Maddie,' he said, 'don't you understand? It must be she—she, this Lady Margaret—the great heiress! Good heavens!'

Mrs. Selby almost screamed.

'Despard!' was all she could say. But she quickly recovered herself. 'Well, after all,' she went on, 'I don't see there's any harm done. She will know that you were absolutely disinterested, and surely that will go a long way. But—just to think of it! Oh, Despard, fancy your saying that you half thought she was going to be a governess! Oh, dear, how extraordinary! And I that was so regretting that you had not met her! What a good thing you did not—I mean what a good thing that my letter showing your ignorance was written and sent before you knew who she was! Don't you see how lucky it was?'

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(To be continued.)

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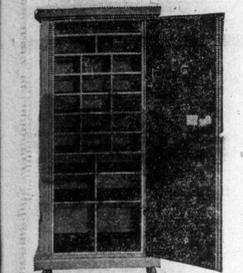
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