

UNCLE MAX.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—Continued.

But I resolved to watch: no eyes should be so vigilant as mine. I was determined that nothing should escape my scrutiny; at least I was in possession of certain facts that would help me in finding the clue I wanted. I knew now that Max loved Gladys and had tried to win her: that he had nearly done so, and was also evident. What had wrought that sudden change? Had Captain Hamilton's brilliant successes really dazzled her fancy and blinded her to Max's quiet unobtrusive virtues? Did she really and truly prefer her cousin? This was what I had to find out, and here Max could not help me.

There was one thing I was glad to know,—that Mr. Hamilton favored Max's suit. At least I should not be working against him. I do not know why, but the thought of doing so would have pained me: I no longer wished to array myself for war against Mr. Hamilton; my enmity had died a natural death for want of fuel. I felt grateful to him for his kindness to Max: no doubt he had a fellow-feeling with him. That dear old gossip, Mrs. Maberley, had told me something about Mr. Hamilton on my second visit. Max knew about it, of course; he had said a word to me once on the subject, but he said Max's way to gossip about his neighbors; he once said, laughing, that he left all the choice bits of scandal to his good old friend at Maberley.

"I wanted to know what you wore like, my hair," she said, with her pretty Scotch accent; "and the doctor came in as I was turning it over in my mind, so I made bold to ask him to describe you. I thought he was a long time answering, and at last he said, 'What put that into your head, granny?' as if he were a little bit taken aback by the question. 'Well, doctor,' I returned, 'we all of us like to see the faces of those we love; and I am all in the dark. That dear young lady is doing the Lord's work with all her might, and she has a voice that makes me think of heaven, and the choir of angels, and the golden harps, and maybe her face is as beautiful as her voice.' 'Oh, no,' he says quite sharply to that, 'she is not beautiful at all; indeed, I am not sure that most people would not think her plain.' 'I suppose I was an old ninny, but I did not like to hear him say this, my hair, for I knew it could not be the truth; but he went on after a minute. 'It is not easy to describe the face of a person who knows so well. I find it difficult to answer your question. Miss Garston has such a true face, care seems to trust it in a minute: it is the face of an honest kindly woman who will never do you any harm; and then I saw what she meant. Why, hair, the angels have this sort of beauty, and it lasts the longest; that is the sort of face they have there.' I heard all this silently, and was thankful that Elspeth's blind eyes could not see the burning flush of mortification that rose to my face. The dear garrulous old body, how could she have put such a question to Mr. Hamilton? and yet how kindly he had answered! A sudden recollection of Irish dark-gray eyes with black lashes came to my mind; I knew Mr. Hamilton was a connoisseur of beauty. I had often heard him describe people, and point out their physical defects with the keenest criticism; he was singularly fastidious on this point; but, in spite of my humiliation, I was glad to know that he had spoken so gently. He had told the truth simply, that was all; at least he had owned I was true; I must content myself with this tribute to my honesty. But it was some days before I could recall Elspeth's words without a sensation of prickly heat: it is strange how painfully these little pin-pricks to our vanity affect us. I was angry with myself for remembering them, and yet they rankled, in spite of Elspeth's quaint and homely consolation. Alas! I was not better than my fellows: Ursula Garston was not the strong-minded woman that Miss Darrell called her. But when I next met Mr. Hamilton I had other thoughts to engross me, for Elspeth was dying, and we were standing together by her bedside. I had not sent for Mr. Hamilton, for I knew that he could do nothing more for her; but he had met one of the children in the village, and on hearing the end was approaching had come at once to render me any help in his power. Perhaps he thought I should like to have him there. Elspeth's pinched wrinkled face brightened as she heard his voice. 'Ay, doctor, I am glad to know you are there: you have been with me, thank you, my dear, I am dying like a lad. The Lord bless you both! and he will,—he will! with feeble earnestness. I bent down and kissed her cold cheek. 'Never mind us, Elspeth: only tell us that all is well with you. You are not afraid, dear granny?' 'What's to fear, my hair, with the Lord holding my hand?—and he will not let go; ah, no, he will never let go! Ay, I have come to the dark river, but it will not do more than wet my feet. I'll be carried over, for I am old and weak,—old and weak, my dear.' These were her last words, and half an hour afterwards the change came, and Elspeth's sightless eyes were opened to the light of immortality. That night I took up a little worn copy of the 'Pilgrim's Progress' that I had had from childhood, and opened it at a favorite passage, where Christian and his companions are talking with the shining ones as they went up towards the Celestial city, and I thought of Elspeth as I read it. 'You are going now,' said they, 'to the paradise of God, wherein you shall see the Tree of Life, and eat of the never-falling fruit thereof; and when you come there you shall have white robes given you, and your walk and talk shall be every day with the King, even all the days of eternity. There you shall not see again such things as you saw when you were in the lower regions, upon the earth, to wit, sorrow, sickness, and death, for the former things are passed away. And the men asked, 'What must we do in that holy place?' To whom it was answered, 'You must then receive the comfort of your toil, and have joy for all your sorrow.' I thought of Elspeth's last words, 'Old and weak,—old and weak, my dear. Surely they had come true: those aged feet had barely touched the cold water. Gently and tenderly she had been carried across to the green pastures and still waters in the paradise of God.

CHAPTER XXIX. MISS DARRELL HAS A HEADACHE. I began to feel that Gladys had been away a long time, and to wish for her return. I was much disappointed, then, on receiving a letter from her about a fortnight after Elspeth's death, telling me that Colonel Maberley had made up his mind to spend Easter in Paris, and that she had promised to accompany him. 'I shall be sorry to be so long without your companionship,' she wrote. 'I miss you more than I can say; but I am sure that it is far better for me to remain away as long as possible: the change will certainly do me good. I am quite strong and well: they spoil me dreadfully, but I think this sort of treatment suits me best.' It was a long letter, and seemed to be written in a more cheerful mood than usual. There was a charming description of a trip they had taken, with little graceful touches of humor here and there. I handed the letter silently to Max when he called the next day. I thought that it would be no harm to show it to him. He took it to the window, and was so busy reading it that I had half finished a letter I was writing to Jill before he laid it down on my desk. 'Thank you for letting me see it,' he said, quietly: 'it has been a great pleasure. Somehow, as I read it, it seemed as though the old Gladys Hamilton had written it,—not the one we know now. Indeed, she seems much better.' 'Yes, and we must make up our minds to do without her,' I answered, with a sigh. 'And we shall do so most willingly,' he returned, 'if we know the change is benefiting her.' And then, with a change of his tone, 'What a beautiful handwriting here, Ursula!—so firm and clear, so characteristic of the writer. Does she often write you such long, interesting letters? You are much to be envied, my dear. Well, well, the day's work is waiting for me.' And with that he went off, without saying another word. My next visitor was Mr. Hamilton. He came to tell me of an accident. A young laborer had fallen off a scaffolding, and a compound fracture of the right arm had been the result. He was also badly shaken and bruised, and was altogether in a miserable plight. I promised, of course, to go with him at once; but he told me that there was no immediate hurry; he had attended to the arm and left him very comfortable, and he would do well for the next hour or two; and, as Mr. Hamilton seemed inclined to linger for a little chat, I could not refuse to oblige him. 'It is just as well that this piece of work has come to me,' I said, presently, 'for I was feeling terribly idle. Since Elspeth's death I have not had a single case, and have employed my leisure in writing long letters to my relations and taking country rambles with Tinker.' 'That is right,' he returned, heartily. 'I am sure we worked you far too hard at one time.' 'It did not hurt me, and I should not care to be idle for long.—Yes, I have heard from Gladys,' for his eyes fell on the open letter that lay beside us. 'I am rather disappointed that I shall not see her before I go away.' 'Are you going away, then?' he asked, very quickly, and I thought the news did not seem to please him. 'Not for three weeks. I hope my patient will be getting on by that time, and will be able to spare me: at any rate, I can give his mother a lesson or two. You know my cousin is to be married, and I have promised to help Aunt Philippa.'

'How long do you think you will be away?' he demanded, with a touch of his old abruptness. 'For a fortnight. I could not arrange for less. Sara is making such a point of it.' 'A whole fortnight! I am afraid you are terribly idle, after all, Miss Garston. You are growing tired of this humdrum place. You are yearning for 'the leaks and cucumbers of Egypt,' with a grim smile. 'You are wrong,' I returned, with more earnestness than the occasion warranted. 'I feel a strange reluctance to re-enter Vanity Fair. The splendors of a gay wedding are too to my taste. Sara tells me that her reception after the ceremony will be attended by about two hundred guests. To me the idea is simply barbarous. I expect I shall be heartily glad to get back to Heathfield.' 'I was surprised to see how pleased Mr. Hamilton looked at this speech. I had been thinking of my work and my quiet little nook of Gladwyn, when I spoke; but he seemed to accept it as a personal compliment. 'I assure you that we shall welcome you back most gladly,' he returned. 'The place will not seem like itself without our busy village maid. Well, you have worked hard enough for six months; you deserve a holiday. I should like to see you in your butterfly gown, Miss Garston. I fancy, however, that I should recognize you.' 'With a sudden pang I remembered Elspeth's words. He does not think that such home attire will become me. I thought he preferred me in my usual nun's garb of black serge.' 'Oh,' I said, petulantly and foolishly, 'I must own that I shall look rather like a crow dressed up in peacock's feathers in the grand gown Sara has chosen for me; but I was a little taken aback, and felt inclined to laugh, when he asked me, with an air of interest, what it was like in color and material.' 'Sara wished it to be red plush,' I replied, demurely; 'but I refused to wear it, so she has waived that in favor of a dark green velvet. I think it is absolutely wicked to make Uncle Brian pay for such a dress; but it seems that Sara will get her own way, so I must put up with all they choose to give me.' 'That is hardly spoken graciously. If your uncle be rich, why should he not please himself in buying you a velvet gown? I think the fair bride-elect has good taste. You will look very well in dark-green velvet; light tights would not suit you at all; red would be too gay.' He spoke with such gravity and decision that I thought it best not to contradict him: I even repressed my inclination to laugh; if he looked to be dogmatic on the subject of my dress, I would not hinder him. The next moment, however, he dismissed the matter. 'I agree with you in disliking gay weddings. The idea is singularly repugnant to me. Because two people elect to join hands for the journey of life, is there any adequate reason why all their idle acquirements should accompany them with ornamental prancing and all sorts of fooleries just at the most solemn moment of their life?' 'I suppose they wish to express their sympathy,' I returned. 'Sympathy should wear a quieter garb. These folks come to church to show their fine fathers and make a fuss; they do not care a jot for the solemnity of the service; and yet to me it is as awful in its way as the burial service. 'Till death do us part,—say any one, man or woman, say these words lightly and not bring down a doom upon himself?' He spoke with suppressed excitement, walking up and down the room: one could see how strongly he felt his words. Was he thinking of Mrs. Carrick? I wondered. He gave a slight shudder, as though some unwelcome thought intruded itself, and then he turned to me with a forced smile. 'I am boring you, I am afraid. I get horribly excited over the shame of conventionalities. What were we talking about? Oh, I remember: Lady Betty, but not such a volume as that,' glancing at the closely written sheets. 'You are her chief correspondent, I believe; but she told us her plans. For my part, I am glad that she should enjoy this trip to Paris. Really, the Maberleys are most kind. I sent her a check to add to her amusements, for of course all girls like shopping.' How generous he was to his sisters! with all his faults of manner, he seemed to grudge them nothing. But all the same I knew Gladys would have valued a few kind words from him far more than the check; but perhaps he had written to her as well. But he seemed rather surprised when I asked him the question. 'Oh, no; I never write to my sisters: they would not care for a letter from me. Etta offered to enquire for me in a letter she had just finished to Gladys, so that saved all trouble. By the bye, Miss Garston, I hope you will come up to Gladwyn one evening before you leave Heathfield. I do not see why we are to be deserted in this fashion.' Neither did I, if he put it in this way; reluctant as I was to spend an evening there in Gladys's absence, it certainly was not quite kind either to him or to Lady Betty to refuse. He seemed to anticipate a refusal, however; for he said, hastily, 'Never mind answering me now. Etta shall write to you in proper form, and you shall fix your own evening. Now I have hindered you sufficiently, so I will take my leave,—which he did, but I heard him some time afterwards talking to Nathaniel in the porch. A few days after this I received a civil note from Miss Darrell, pressing me to spend a long evening with them, and begging me to bring my prettiest songs. I made the rather lame excuse that I was much engaged with my new patient, and fixed the latest day that I could,—the very last evening before I was to leave for London. Mr. Hamilton met me a few hours afterwards, and asked me rather dryly what my numerous engagements were. 'You are most unobscure of your sex,' he added, when I had no answer to make to this. 'I shall take care that you are properly punished, for neither Caniliffe nor Tudor shall be asked to meet you. Etta was sure you would like one or both to come, but I put my veto on it at once.' 'Then you were very disagreeable,' I returned, laughing. 'I wanted Uncle Max very much.' But he only shook his head at my good-humoredly, and scolded me for my want of amiability. I determined, when the evening came, that he should not find fault with me in any way. I was rather in a holiday mood; my patient was going on well, and his mother was a neat, capable body, and might be trusted to look after him. No other cases had come to me, and I might leave Heathfield with a clear conscience. Uncle Max would miss me, but an old college friend was coming to stay at the vicarage, so I could be better spared. I had seen a great deal of Mr. Tudor lately. I often met him in the village, and he always turned back and walked with me: he met me on this occasion, and walked to the gates of Gladwyn. Indeed, he detained me for some minutes in the road, trying to extract particulars about the wedding. 'Miss Jocelyn is to be bridesmaid, then,' describing a circle with his stick in the dust. 'Yes. Poor Sara is afraid that she will be quite overshadowed by Jill's bigness; she has made her promise not to stand quite close. They have got a match for her. Grace Underley is as tall as Jill, and very fair. Sara calls them her night and morning bridesmaids.' 'I think I shall be in London on the fourteenth. I thought, Miss Garston, that there was a prejudice to weddings in May.' 'Yes; but Sara laughs at the idea, and Colonel Ferguson says it is all nonsense. I did not know you were coming to town so soon.' 'Some of my people will be up then,' he said, absently. 'Perhaps I shall have a peep at you all; but of course,—rather hastily.—I shall not call at Hyde Park Gate until the wedding is over.' I wished he would not call then. What was the good of feeding his boyish fancy? It would soon die a natural death, if he would only be wise. Poor Mr. Tudor! I began to be afraid that he was very much in earnest, after all: there was a grave expression on his face as he turned away. Perhaps he knew, as I did, that our big awkward Jill would develop into a splendid woman; that one of these days Jocelyn Garston would be far more admired than her sister; that the ugly duckling would soon change into a swan. There were times even now when Jill looked positively handsome, if only her short black locks would grow, and if she would leave off hunching her shoulders. 'I should like Lawrence Tudor to have my Jill, if he were only rich; but there is no hope for him now, poor fellow!' I said to myself, as I walked up the gravel walk towards the house. Gladwyn looked its best this evening. The shady little lawn that surrounded the house looked cool and inviting; the birds were singing merrily from the avenue of young oaks, and the air was sweet with the scent of May-blossoms and wall-flowers; great bunches of them were placed in the hall. Thornton, who admitted me, said that Leah would be waiting for me in the blue room, as Miss Darrell's room was called: so I went up at once. I was passing through the dressing-room, when I saw the bedroom door was half opened, and a voice—I scarcely recognized it as Miss Darrell's, it was so different from her usual low, toneless voice—exclaimed, angrily, 'You forget yourself strangely, Leah! one would think you were the mistress said I the maid, to hear you speaking to me.' 'I can't help that, Miss Etta,' returned the woman, insolently. 'If you are not more punctual in your payments, I will go to the master myself and tell him. But here I knocked sharply at the door to warn them of my presence, and Leah ceased abruptly, while Miss Darrell bade me enter. She tried to meet me as usual, but her face was flushed, and she looked at me unusually, as though she feared that I had overheard Leah's speech. I thought Leah looked sullen and resentful as she walked upon me. It was a most forbidding face. I was glad when Miss Darrell dismissed her on some slight pretext. 'Leah is in a bad temper this evening,' she observed, examining the clasp of a hand-some bracelet as she spoke. I noticed then that she had beautiful arms, as well as finely shaped hands, and the emerald-eyed smile showed to advantage. 'She is a most invaluable person, but she can take liberties sometimes. Perhaps you heard me scolding her; but I consider she was decidedly in the wrong. 'She does not look very good-tempered,' was my reply. Miss Darrell still looked flushed and perturbed; but she took up her fan and vainly gretted, and proposed that we should join Lady Betty in the drawing-room. Leah was in the hall. As we passed her, she addressed Miss Darrell. 'If you can spare me a moment, ma'am, I should like to speak to you,' she said, quite civilly; but I thought her manner a little menacing. 'Will not another time do, Leah?' returned her mistress, in a worried tone; but the next moment she begged me to go in without her. Lady Betty was sitting by the open window, with Nap beside her. I thought the poor little girl looked dull and lonely. She gave an exclamation of pleasure at seeing me, and ran towards me with outstretched hands. She looked like a child in her little white gown and blue ribbons, with her short curly hair. 'I am so glad to see you, Miss Garston! I thought Etta would keep you. I have been

alone all the afternoon: Etta never sits with me now. How I wish Gladys would come back! I have no one to speak to, and I miss her horribly.' 'Poor Lady Betty!' 'You would say so, if you knew how horrid it all was.—Just now, as I was sitting alone, I felt like a poor little prisoner shut up in an enchanted tower. Giles is the magician, and Etta is the wicked witch. I was making up quite a story about it.' 'Why have you not been to see me lately, Lady Betty?' 'Oh, how silly you are to ask me such a question!' she returned, pettishly. 'You had better ask Witch Etta. Now you pretend to look surprised. She won't let me come—there!' 'My dear child, surely you need not consult your cousin.' 'Of course not,' wrinkling her forehead; 'but then, you see, Witch Etta consults me; she makes a point of finding out all my little plans and slipping them in the bud. She says she really cannot allow me to go so often to the White Cottage; Mr. Caniliffe and Mr. Tudor are always there, and it is not proper. She is always hinting that I want to meet Mr. Tudor, and it is no good telling her that I never think of such a thing.' Lady Betty was half crying. A more innocent, harmless little soul never breathed: she had not a speck of coquetry in her nature. I felt indignant at such an accusation. 'It is all nonsense, Lady Betty,' I returned, sharply. 'Mr. Tudor has not called at the cottage more than once since Jill left me, and then Uncle Max sent him. When I first came to Heathfield, he was very kind in doing me little services, and he dropped in two or three times when Jill was with me; but indeed he has never been a constant visitor. When we meet it is at the vicarage, or in the street.' 'You would never convince Etta of that,' replied Lady Betty, disconsolately. 'She has even told Giles how often Mr. Tudor goes to the cottage, and she has got it into her head that I am always trying to meet him there. It is such an odious idea, only worthy of Etta herself!' went on the little girl, indignantly. 'If I could only make her hold her tongue to Giles!' 'I would not trouble about it if I were you, dear. No one who knows you would believe it. Such an idea would never occur to Mr. Tudor: he is an honest, simple young fellow, who is not ashamed to respect women in the good old-fashioned way.' 'Oh, yes, I like him, and so does Jill; and I wish he were a thousand miles off, and then Etta would give me a little peace. How angry Gladys would be if she knew it! But I don't mean to trouble her about my small worries, poor darling.' 'I had never heard Lady Betty speak with such womanly dignity. She was so often childish and whimsical that one never expected her to be grave and responsible like other people. She kissed me presently, and said I had done her good, and would I always believe in her in spite of Etta, for she was not the giddy little creature that Etta made her out to be; she was sure Giles would think more of her but for Etta's mischief-making. Mr. Hamilton came in after this, and sat down by us, but Miss Darrell did not make her appearance until the gong sounded, and then she hurried in with a breathless apology. I do not know what made me watch her so closely all dinner-time. She took very little part in the conversation, seemed absent and thoughtful, and started nervously when Mr. Hamilton spoke to her. He told her once that she looked pale and tired, and she said then that the evening was close, and that her headache had made her eyes so heavy, or if she had been crying. Mr. Hamilton was a little quiet, too, though dinner, but I listened with great interest when Lady Betty and I talked about the approaching wedding. I felt to satisfy her curiosity on many points—the bride's and bridesmaids' dresses, and the programme for the day. The details did not seem to bore Mr. Hamilton. His face never once wore its cynical expression; but when we returned to the drawing-room, and Lady Betty wanted to continue the subject, he took her quietly by the shoulders and marched her off to Miss Darrell. 'Make the child hold her tongue, Etta,' he said, good-humoredly. 'I want to coax Miss Garston to sing to us.' And then he came to me with the smile I liked best to see on his face, and held out his hand. I was quite willing to oblige him, and he kept me hard at work for nearly an hour, first asking me if I were tired, and then beginning for one more song; and sometimes I thought of Gladys as I sang, and sometimes of Max; and once of Mrs. Carrick, with her wonderful gray eyes, and her false fair face. When I had finished Leah Mr. Hamilton looking at me rather strangely. 'Why do you sing such sad songs?' he asked, in a low voice, as though he did not wish to be overheard; but he need not have been afraid: Miss Darrell was evidently taking no notice of any one just then. She was lying back in her chair with her eyes closed, and I noticed afterwards that her forehead was lined like an old woman's. 'I like melancholy songs,' was my reply, and I fingered the notes a little nervously, for his look was rather too keen just then, and I had been thinking of Mrs. Carrick. 'But you are not melancholy,' he persisted. 'There is no weak sentimentality in your nature. Just now there was a passion in your voice that startled me, as though you were drawing from some secret well.' He roused, and then went on, half playfully, 'If I were like the Hebrew steward, and asked you to let down your pitcher and give me a draught, I wonder what you would answer?' 'That would depend on circumstances. You would find it difficult to persuade me that you were thirsty, or needed anything that I could give.' 'Would it be so difficult as all that?' he returned, thoughtfully. 'I thought we were friends; and that you had penetrated beneath the upper crust; that in spite of my faults you trusted me a little.' His earnestness troubled me. I hardly knew what he meant. 'Of course we are friends,' I answered, hastily. 'I can trust you more than a little.' And I would have risen from my seat, but he put his hand gently on my sleeve. 'Wait a moment. You are going away, and I may not have another opportunity. I want to tell you something. You have done me good; you have taught me that women can be trusted, after all. I thank you most heartily for that lesson.' 'I do not know what you mean,' I faltered; but I felt a singular pleasure at these words. 'I have done nothing. It is you that have been good to me.' 'Pshaw!' impatiently. 'I thought you more sensible than to say that. Now, I want you, his voice softening again, 'to try and think better of me; not to judge by appearances, or to take other people's judgments, but to be as true and charitable to me as you are to others. Promise me this before you go, Miss Garston.' I do not know why the tears started to my eyes. I could hardly answer him. 'Will you try to do this?' he persisted, stooping over me. (To be continued.)