

easy for two girls to earn enough to surround their mother with all the comforts to which she had been accustomed.

But Fergus was getting on, though slowly, and what he at first lacked in means he made up by self-denial, for the sake of his mother and the girls.

For five years Mrs. Ainley enjoyed the good things of this life in sufficient measure, but she was never allowed to know at what a cost to themselves her children managed to keep up the old home for her. Her death was preceded by months of illness; and then Nelly, worn out with nursing, broke down in health, and was ordered to a warmer climate for the winter.

All these things caused a constant drain on the young doctor's resources, and in spite of an increasing practice he could never do more than meet the calls upon him, and, by strictest economy, keep out of debt.

Fortunately, Bertha obtained a situation as companion to a lady, an old friend of the family, who had also been ordered to the south of Europe for the winter. So the sisters travelled together and remained near neighbours, though they were not under the same roof.

The old home had been broken up, perforce, before the girls left England.

The change proved an eventful one, both for Nelly and Bertha. The only son of Mrs. Caine, who accompanied the party to Cannes, asked Bertha to be his wife, with the full consent of his mother. The young people had been long acquainted, so within three months a quiet wedding gave the orphan girl husband and mother.

A little later, Nelly, who had regained her strength, and was on a visit to her sister before beginning to work again, won the affection of one who was worthy to call her wife, and able to offer her a delightful home, though not in England.

Dr. Ainley and Madge rejoiced in the joy of the absent sisters, but a little pang of regret mingled with their honest sympathy.

"It is dreadfully hard on me, Fergus," said Margery, with a rueful face. "Two sisters married ever so many hundreds of miles away, and the sole remaining daughter of the family left blooming alone, without even the consolation of having figured as bridesmaid. I am out of everything; and your share has been rather a costly one."

"I do not grudge it," was the answer. "The girls were welcome to what I could do, and I only wish that had been more and better. I am going to save up for your *trousseau* now, Madge. Having had to surrender two sisters to the care of husbands, without any warning to speak of, it behooves me to prepare against future surprises."

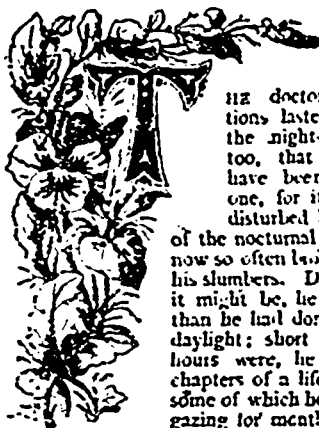
"I shall not surprise you in a similar way, dear. Beside, I intend you to think more of yourself and less of other people. I have plans, first, for the renewal of your wardrobe, which you have neglected to shabbiness; next, for the improvement of the furniture and house."

"You shall do exactly as you like, Madge. I cannot be thankful enough that I am allowed to keep you. I had counted on having the other girls here in turns, to bear you company, and make me feel quite a family man; but that dream is over. We shall be examples as the old bachelor doctor and his maiden sister—examples of family affection to the young folk around us, eh, Madge?"

And then Margery turned upon her brother with an aggrieved look, and said, "Fergus, I do not feel odd at all. I was only seventeen when I came here with you, and that is not ten years ago. You are barely four-and-thirty. Is it not a little too soon for us to pose as old bachelor and spinster, dear?"

There was something in Madge's words and tone which set Dr. Fergus Ainley thinking.

CHAPTER II.



what would be the next incident in it.

As Fergus Ainley lay there, painfully awake, his sister was sleeping, but dreaming; and the waking thoughts and the sleeper's dreams were on the same subject.

Fergus Ainley had many well-wishers and admiring acquaintances who might have developed into friends under more favourable circumstances. He never lacked invitations, especially to bachelor gatherings, but he accepted few of these for two reasons; one, that his circumstances would not permit him to entertain on a similar scale; the other, that he preferred to spend even his leisure in the interests of his profession, and in giving such simple pleasures as lay within his reach to Margery.

He had, however, one dear friend, Frank Roworth, whose only fault, he used to say, were that he had too much time and money at his disposal, and no one to control him in the use to which he devoted them. Happily, he desired to use them both well, and often consulted Fergus as to the best means of doing this.

As Fergus lay thinking, he called to mind how he had for some time refrained from introducing Frank to Margery. He knew that pride was at the bottom of this reticence. He would not give people the chance of saying that he was trying to put his sister in the way of gaining a rich husband. So the friends met everywhere but at the Corner House. It chanced, however, one day that Frank called there to enquire for the doctor, and saw Madge, who was expecting her brother's immediate return, and asked him to wait for it.

Everybody knows how uncertain a doctor's movements are, and on this occasion they were provokingly so.

Time passed. The expected minutes lengthened into an hour, and the visitor still waited for his friend. When the doctor did appear, he found that Frank and his sister had become like old acquaintances through their mutual interest in himself. After that there could be no question of excluding young Roworth, and he had happened in at the Corner House whenever he chose, to find a welcome both from Fergus and Madge.

Fergus could call to mind how often he had done this of late, also that Madge's mood had varied according to the frequency of Roworth's visits, brightening under his cheery influence, and becoming a shade graver and quieter when his absence from town deprived them of his society for a longer period.

"What a blind fool I have been!" said the doctor to himself. "How could Frank help loving Madge, or Madge fail to care for the very finest fellow I know! Each is able to appreciate the other's worth. Exactly suited in age, for Frank is three years the

older of the two. He is able to give her all that I should have rejoiced to give my sister if fortune had favoured me; and Madge, with pride enough of a sort, will not be too proud to owe all to him who gives pure love along with the rest, and deems himself the richer for it—as indeed he will be."

These cogitations cost Fergus Ainley more than some hours of sleep. He had a fierce battle with self, and came off conqueror. True, it was hard to picture what his house would be without Madge. He should never call it home again, for it was only her presence that made it such. What she had been to him during nearly ten years of striving and struggling, of successes that had been helpful to his family, yet left him almost where he began so far as money went, no one could realise. Well, he would thank God for all she had been, and when Frank Roworth asked for Madge, he would give her to him ungrudgingly, and with a prayer for a blessing upon them both. About his own loneliness, which must of necessity follow, he would not even think. He had been thankful to know of the happy lot which had come to Nelly and Bertha. Should he be more selfish when the future of Margery was in question?

Dr. Ainley had just reached this point when his waking dreams were dispersed by the sound of the night bell. He had lost his opportunity, and he must give up all hope of rest for the present.

Never had Madge worked so hard to insure her brother's comfort, and to improve every thing about him and his home, as she did during the three months that followed. In the meanwhile, Frank Roworth's visits became more frequent and the special object thereof more marked.

Fergus indeed wondered at his continued silence; then a new light broke upon him. Madge was restraining him from speaking for her brother's sake, and that she might complete various matters on which her busy fingers were engaged.

The time came at last when Frank asked his friend to ratify the promise he had already won from Madge, and when the girl hid her wet face on her brother's shoulder, and shed tears half glad, half sorrowful, as she heard Fergus say—

"It is hard to part with such a sister, but I know of no one to whom I could give Margery so willingly as to you."

"It seems wicked to leave you, dear," whispered Madge, clinging more closely to her brother, "but I do care so much for Frank, and he will not take me away. We shall be near each other, and I will look after things for you still. You have always wanted a brother, and Frank will be such a true one."

"I know it, Madge. And it will be far better to have you within reach than far away, like the other girls. You will do everything in your power for me still."

Then Fergus slipped away to his quiet study, leaving the pair together. He smiled as he thought of Madge's plans and promises, well knowing how thoroughly she meant them, and yet how impossible it would be for her to carry them out when she became Frank's wife.

This was soon made evident. Madge had always wished, but never hoped, to see something of other lands. Naturally, Frank desired to gratify this wish, and planned a most comprehensive wedding-tour, which would last three months at least.

Farewell to any immediate prospect of seeing Madge sitting in and out of the Corner House, and superintending domestic matters as of old.

Dr. Ainley's heart sank as he resigned his bright companion to her husband's keeping.

