

Hugh put his hand affectionately through the doctor's arm with one of his boyish impulses as he said:

"Your unswerving kindness to me has given you the right to speak plainly; there can be no question of forgiveness. I feel sometimes that I am on the wrong track; but what would you have me do?"

"Care a little about something besides your business; have a hobby. What has become of all your enthusiasm and dreams of leading a useful life? Hang it! you had better get married, and make a home for yourself."

Hugh's face clouded over, and he said quietly:

"I shall never marry. Women are too shallow to let me risk my life's happiness with any one of them."

"You know nothing about it," retorted the doctor bluntly. "You had better throw all that nonsense overboard, and marry Miss Durant—that is, if she will have you."

"Thank you. If I married, I should like my wife to marry me, not my house and income."

"You are wrong. Money had nothing to do with Marjorie throwing you over, any more than it would influence her choice now. She might have lived a life of ease and idleness with some of her people, but she was too proud; and a girl who has made the plucky fight she has made is little likely to put her pride in her pocket and say, 'Thank you, kind sir,' to the first man who asks her to marry him. As a matter of fact, you would not be the first, for only a little while ago young Hopwell, the brewer, wanted to marry her, and he can show thousands to your hundreds. Not, of course, that I have any reason to believe she would have you if you asked her; but if you still care for her, and I believe you do, you can but try, and if you win her, I shall say you are a deuced lucky fellow!"

"You have altered your tune considerably."

"Yes, I have. That girl has been tried in the fire, and has come out pure metal."

Hugh shrugged his shoulders.

"There is very little pure metal knocking about without alloy," he said.

"Hang it, man! you are not without alloy yourself. Seems to me a man expects his wife to be perfect without thinking it at all incumbent on him to aim at being anything of the kind."

Hugh laughed.

"Doctor," he said, "I believe you are in love."

CHAPTER V.

In another week it would be Christmas, happiest time of all the year to the happy, and most miserable time to the miserable.

Marjorie felt herself to belong to the last, as she sat in a third class carriage on her way back to Draybridge from a village where she had been giving lessons. It was nearly five o'clock, and as she sat looking out into the darkness she felt both weary and depressed. There could be no gathering together of her people. Mother and sisters were scattered far and wide; all that represented home to her now was the house of a loyal friend.

Marjorie could not afford the cost of the railway journey into Devonshire where her mother was; but Mrs. Durant had the other girls near her, and so could better do without Marjorie than Marjorie could do without her, and the poor girl felt very much out in the cold this dreary winter afternoon. Then she thought of Hugh, and in the empty compartment the girl's cheeks burnt with shame at her own folly and shallowness. The one man's love was pure gold, Laurence Damer's a glittering sham, which crumbled at the touch of unmerited disgrace. Now it was too late, she knew that she really loved Hugh, though her fancy had swerved for a while, and she could almost feel grateful for the trouble which had saved her from becoming the wife of Mr. Damer. Of course Hugh had quite got over his love for her, his manner proved it; indeed, had she suspected otherwise she would not have been so much at ease in his presence, for even if he had wished it she could never marry him now. She had turned her back upon him when he was poor, and was working night and day for her sake; she could not marry him now that he had won his footing. Then she thought of her lost home, where all had seemed so safe, so secure; when she had lived a careless, happy life, surrounded with love. Nothing was left but the memory.

"I wonder for how many years I shall go on like this, teaching stupid or spoiled children, no matter how sick or sad I may be; and when I am old, younger and stronger people will push me from my place, and the end—what will it be?"

As these unhappy thoughts passed through Marjorie's mind, she became aware of some men in the next compartment who were evidently arguing among themselves. It is generally supposed that the lower orders of Draybridge and its neighborhood use most terrible language, but as it is perfectly unintelligible to anyone but themselves no one is shocked. This being the case, Marjorie's attention would not have been attracted, but that she heard the name Northwick mentioned, followed by a string of more or less intelligible curses.

She started from her dreamy, listless attitude and listened. The partition between the two compartments was carried to within a few inches of the roof, too high to see over, but allowing anyone who listened intently to hear portions of a conversation.

As soon as the man who had startled Marjorie ceased speaking, another voice took up the tale, and a third broke in at intervals.

Evidently three men were in the compartment. Presently they lowered their voices, and seemed to be planning something. Marjorie held her breath for fear of losing the thread of what they were saying.

(To be continued.)

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