

A DISGRACE TO HER FAMILY.

(Continued.)

So saying, he smiled gently but sadly at the little mud-stained figure by his side. The discovery of Geraldine's unworthiness had produced a painful impression on his mind which he could not shake off.

Maggie looked up at him with her clear eyes, through which the soul within seemed to shine.

"I think you will find her," she said hopefully. "At any rate you deserve to."

The singular honesty and tenderness of her expression went to his heart, and her belief in him was quite touching. Could it be that he had made a mistake, and that all women were not equally false and frivolous? Her little plain face appeared glorified by a halo of sweetness, kindness and good-temper. He felt, somehow, that she was more lovable than Geraldine, capable of a truer, holier passion.

"Good God!" he muttered, under his breath; surely she is not a story-teller also. If so, I shall never believe in any feminine thing again. Ah! a good idea. I will put her to the test."

"By-the bye," he said, with well assumed carelessness, "your sister Geraldine has been showing me over your stable. That new horse of hers is an uncommonly good looking one."

"He is indeed," answered Maggie, "and if only he turns out well, he will prove a most extraordinary bargain."

"The 'if' implies a doubt."

"Are you ever without one where a new horse is concerned?"

He laughed.

"How have you contrived to pick up so much worldly wisdom at your tender age, child?"

"Jack has taught me a good deal, and Baines. Baines is our coachman, but to tell you the honest truth, I don't know nearly as much about horses as people seem to imagine. I'm a regular fraud."

"I hope not. I should be greatly disappointed to find your words true, for I have formed a totally different estimate of you. But fraud or no fraud, I suppose you know what's worth buying for this country, and what's not. Therefore, I want to ask your advice on a certain point."

"My advice is good for very little, but I will give it willingly if it can be of any use to you."

"Is that a bargain?"

"Yes, if you like to consider it so."

"Very well then. Your sister Geraldine wishes to sell me her old horse, Paragon. Now tell me frankly; are you of opinion that he will carry me to hounds?"

Maggie turned away her head so that he could not see her face. She was infinitely pained and distressed by her sister's conduct. Yet how could she betray her? If she told Captain Falconer the truth, namely, that Geraldine was trying to take advantage of his being a stranger, in order to get rid of a useless, infirm old horse she no longer cared to ride, what would he think of her? All chance of his marrying Geraldine would be at an end. And if it came to Geraldine's ears that she—Maggie—had been the mischief maker, what a traitor she would be dubbed by the whole family.

"Well," said Captain Falconer, after a long pause, during which he sought, but in vain, to obtain a glimpse of his companion's face, why don't you answer my question, Maggie? I place every confidence in your opinion, and am waiting to hear it."

"I——" she began hoarsely, then breaking off, added, "Oh! Captain Falconer, please don't ask me for my opinion. I have none."

"You can scarcely expect me to believe that."

"You must. I can't help it."

"Well, let me put matters in another way. Here is a very handsome old horse whose only fault is his age. Your sister offers him to me for the absurdly low sum of thirty pounds. I say absurdly, because Miss Geraldine assures me he is sound both in wind and limb——"

"Did Geraldine say that?" interrupted Maggie. "Are you quite sure?"

"Yes, quite. The fact was impressed upon my mind by her repeating it twice."

Maggie groaned. Oh, what duplicity! What shameful, wicked falsehood. It made her blush to be of the same kith and kin—to own the same father and the same mother. To reveal Geraldine's treachery, however, was impossible, and yet her whole nature rose in revolt against the deception practised.

And all the time she felt Captain Falconer's eyes fixed upon her as if they were seeking to read her through. Her throat seemed to grow dry; the words came slowly and with difficulty.

"You ask—me what I—do not know. My—my sister has ridden the horse, not I. It stands to reason that she knows more about him than I do."

There! it was out, and she wished the earth would open and swallow her up so that she might hide her deadly shame, for she knew by intuition that he did not believe her. Some subtle thought reading existed between these two.

Keith Falconer's face dropped. He had not expected this ambiguous reply. From her lips at least he thought to have heard the truth. She was not attractive in the ordinary sense of the word, but she had attracted him, because up to this moment he had believed implicitly in her honesty. There was nothing more to be said.

"Am I to understand that I had better buy the horse?"

"You—you must please yourself, Captain Falconer. You have seen Paragon, and heard what Geraldine said."

He put out his hand abruptly, and said: "Good-bye! It was idiotic of me to have asked for your advice. I might have remembered that you were sisters. Birds of a feather always flock together, as the old saying goes."

His altered tone and look, which clearly showed his displeasure, made the salt tears rush to Maggie's eyes. She hastily took out her pocket-handkerchief, and as she did so a letter dropped to the ground.

"Oh! my letter," she cried. "I have forgotten to post it. How stupid of me, and the mail goes this evening."

He picked it up, and as he did so, saw the big unformed, school-girlish hand in which the address was written.

"Is it to your brother?" he asked, coldly."

"Yes; oh! yes; and I promised Jack I would write every time I got a chance. And now he won't get the letter unless I walk all the way back into Foxington."

"I will post it for you," he said, but there was no warmth in his voice, and his eyes looked with cold displeasure upon her. She felt the difference and seemed to shrink into nothing. He did not trust her any longer. He had discovered that she was unworthy of his regard, and she could not blame him. She could only suffer in silence. But it was hard, very hard to bear, and the worst of it was she liked him, and respected him all the more for resenting her conduct. A man possessing a blunted sense of honour might have passed it over. What a high bred, chivalrous gentleman he looked as he stood for a second and gazed sternly at her. Wild words rose to her lips, but they died away. A flood of bitterness turned her heart to stone. Ah! well. It was better so—better so. The pang would have been infinitely sharper later on. She had sense enough to know that. This was but the fitting punishment of her miserable presumption.

He scarcely pressed the little, timid hand tendered so shyly and tentatively. Thus they parted, and as he strode hastily away, in the direction of Foxington, he muttered to himself:

"Aye, they are sisters, fashioned from the same block. The only difference is, that the elder one fibs with assurance, whilst the younger does it badly, and changes colour. There is nothing to choose between them really. They are true to their false, deceitful sex. And yet what honest eyes that child has! One could swear they were as truthful as the day. Heigh, ho! Maggie," and he sighed heavily, "in helping me to get rid of my last illusion you little know what an uncommonly bad turn you have done me."

The object of his thoughts walked dejectedly home. She had prided herself all her life on never telling a story, and now if she had not actually uttered one she had acquiesced in deceit. She was ill at ease; angry with herself and dissatisfied with Geraldine.

Ought she to have revealed the true position of affairs, and so exposed her sister? Was she bound to tell the truth at all hazards, regardless of consequences?

This was a question which she found it impossible to answer. There seemed so much to be said on either side.

Captain Falconer's distant farewell pierced like a sharp knife into her tender heart. It was horrible to feel she had displeased him, and lost his good opinion, just when they were beginning to be such friends. And she could never explain matters, never—unless Geraldine confessed her share in this most unlucky business, and that was a very forlorn chance. Nevertheless, Maggie resolved to try it.

CHAPTER IX.

"I LIKE SOMEONE ELSE BETTER."

That night, as Geraldine was undressing, she was startled by hearing a loud tap at her door.

"Who's there?" she called out somewhat tartly.

"It's me, Maggie," answered a voice, prelude to the entry of its owner.

"Oh! it's you, is it! And pray what on earth do you want at this hour of the night? It's getting on for eleven o'clock, and you ought to have been in bed ever so long ago."

In reply Maggie seated herself on the hearth-rug before the fire, and tried to fan the dying embers into a blaze. Geraldine watched this operation irritably. It portended a tolerably long stay, and she wanted to retire to rest.

"Well!" she said, "can't you speak?"

Maggie drew up her knees, rested her arms upon them, and looked uncertainly at her sister.

"I hope you won't be angry with me," she began nervously, "but I wish to talk to you about Paragon."

"What of him? Is he ill?"

"Oh! dear no, but," gathering courage as she went on, "I happened to meet Captain Falconer walking along the Foxington Road, after he had paid his visit here, and he mentioned that you were very anxious for him to buy Paragon."

"He need not have used the words 'very anxious.' I flatter myself I displayed no unladylike anxiety on the subject. Nevertheless, I certainly wanted to get rid of the horse."

"It is true then!" Maggie exclaimed with a sigh. "I did so hope it wasn't."

"Perfectly; though I really can't see what business it is of yours."

Captain Falconer told me that you had assured him Paragon was sound both in wind and in limb. Oh, Geraldine, how could you tell such a story!" And she looked her sister full in the face with a pair of reproachful eyes.