

I hardly remember what I felt when I got back—I was met by a surprise."

"May I ask what it was?"

"Certainly miss. Do you remember a black bag of mine?"

"Perfectly."

"When I returned from the city, I found the bag open; and the things I kept in it—the shawl, the linen, and the letter—"

"Gone!"

"Gone."

My heart gave one great leap in me, and broke into vehement throbbings, which made it impossible for me to say a word more. I reined up my horse, and fixed my eyes on Michael. He was startled; he asked if I felt faint. I could only sign to him to go on.

"My own belief," he proceeded, "is that some person burnt the things in my absence, and opened the window to prevent any suspicion being excited by the smell. I am certain I shut the window before I left the room. When I closed it on my return, the fresh air had not entirely removed the smell of burning; and, what is more, I found a heap of ashes in the grate. As to the person who has done me this injury, and why it has been done, those are mysteries beyond my fathoming.—I beg your pardon, miss, I am sure you are not well. Might I advise you to return to the house?"

I accepted his advice, and turned back.

In the tumult of horror and amazement that filled my mind, I could still feel a faint triumph stirring in me through it all, when I saw how alarmed and how anxious he was about me. Nothing more passed between us on the way back. Confronted by the dreadful discovery that I had made, I was silent and helpless. Of the guilty persons concerned in the concealment of the birth, and in the desertion of the infant, my nobly-born, highly-bred, irreproachable aunt now stood revealed before me as one! An older woman than I was might have been hard put to it to preserve her presence of mind, in such a position as mine. Instinct, not reason, served me in my sore need. Instinct, not reason kept me passively and stupidly silent when I got back to the house. "We will talk about it to-morrow," was all I could say to Michael, when he gently lifted me from my horse.

I excused myself from appearing at the luncheon-table; and I drew down the blinds in my sitting-room, so that my face might not betray me when Lady Catherine's maternal duty brought her upstairs to make inquiries. The same excuse served in both cases—my ride had failed to relieve me of my headache. My aunt's brief visit led to one result which is worth mentioning. The indescribable horror of her that I felt, forced the conviction on my mind that we two could live no longer under the same roof. While I was still trying to face this alternative with the needful composure, my uncle presented himself, in some anxiety about my continued illness. I should certainly have burst out crying, when the kind and dear old man kissed me and consoled with me, if he had not brought news with him which turned back all my thoughts on myself and my aunt. Michael had shown the General his letter, and had given notice to leave. Lady Catherine was present at the time. To her husband's amazement, she abruptly interfered with a personal request to Michael to think better of it, and to remain in his place!

"I should not have troubled you, my dear, on this unpleasant subject," said my uncle, "if Michael had not told me that you were aware of the circumstances under which he feels it his duty to leave us. After your aunt's interference (quite incomprehensible to me), the man hardly knows what to do. Being your groom, he begs me to ask if there is any impropriety in his leaving the difficulty to your decision. I tell you of his request, Miss; but I strongly advise you to decline taking any responsibility on yourself."

I answered mechanically, accepting my uncle's suggestion, while my thoughts were wholly absorbed in this last of the many extraordinary proceedings on Lady Catherine's part since Michael had entered the house. There are limits—out of books and plays—to the innocence of a young unmarried woman. After what I had just heard, the doubts which had thus far perplexed me were suddenly and completely cleared up. I said to my secret self: "She has some human feeling left. Michael Bloomfield is her son!"

From the moment when my mind emerged from the darkness, I recovered the use of such intelligence and courage as I naturally possessed. From this point, you will find that, right or wrong, I saw my way before me, and took it.

To say that I felt for the General with my whole heart, is merely to own that I could be commonly grateful. I sat on his knee, and laid my cheek against his cheek, and thanked him for his long, long years of kindness to me. He stopped me in his simple generous way. "Why, Miss, you talk as if you were going to leave us!" I started up, and went to the window, opening it and complaining of the heat, and so concealing from him that he had unconsciously anticipated the event that was indeed to come. When I returned to my chair, he helped me to recover myself by alluding once more to my aunt. He feared that her health was in some way impaired. In the time when they had first met, she was subject to nervous maladies, having their origin in a 'calamity' which was never mentioned by either of them in later days. She might possibly be suffering again, from some other form of nervous derangement, and he seriously thought of persuading her to send for medical advice.

Under ordinary circumstances, this vague reference to a 'calamity' would not have excited any special interest in me. But my mind was now in a state of morbid suspicion. I knew that my uncle and aunt had been married for twenty-four years; and I remembered Michael had described himself as being twenty-six years old. Baring these circumstances in mind, it struck me that I might be acting wisely (in Michael's interest) if I persuaded the General to speak further of what had happened, at the time when he met the woman an evil destiny had bestowed on him for a wife. Nothing but the consideration of saving the man I loved would have reconciled me to making my own secret use of the recollections which my uncle might innocently confide to me. As it was, I thought the means would, in this case, be for once justified by the end. Before we part, I have little doubt that you will think so too.

I found it an easier task than I had anticipated to turn the talk back again to the days when the General had seen Lady Catherine for the first time. He was proud of the circumstances under which he had won his wife. Ah, how my heart ached for him as I saw his eyes sparkle and the colour mount in his fine rugged face!

This is the substance of what I heard from him. I tell it briefly, because it is painful to me to tell it at all.

My uncle had met Lady Catherine at her father's country house. She had then reappeared in society, after a long period of seclusion, passed partly in England, partly on the Continent. Before the date of her retirement, she had been engaged to marry a French nobleman, equally illustrious by his birth, and by his diplomatic services in the East. Within a few weeks of the wedding-day, he was drowned by the wreck of his yacht. This was the calamity to which my uncle had referred.

Lady Catherine's mind was so seriously affected by the dreadful event, that the doctors refused to answer for the consequences, unless she was at once placed in the strictest retirement. Her mother, and a French maid devotedly attached to her, were the only persons whom it was considered safe for the young lady to see, until time and care had, in some degree, composed her. An after-residence in a quiet Swiss valley slowly completed the restoration of her health. Her return to her friends and admirers was naturally a subject of sincere rejoicing among the guests assembled in her father's house. My uncle's interest in Lady Catherine soon developed into love. They were equals in rank, and well suited to each other in age. The parents raised no obstacles; but they did not conceal from their guest that the disaster which had befallen their daughter was but too likely to discipline her to receive his addresses, or any man's addresses, favourably. To their surprise, they proved to be wrong. The young lady was touched by the simplicity and the delicacy with which her lover urged his suit. She had lived among worldly people. This was a man whose devotion she could believe to be sincere. They were married.

Had no unusual circumstances occurred? Had nothing happened which the General had forgotten? Nothing.

X.

It is surely needless that I should stop here, to draw the plain inferences from the events just related. Any person who remembers that the shawl in which the infant was wrapped came from those Eastern regions which were associated with the French nobleman's diplomatic services—also, that the faults of composition in the letter found on the child were exactly the faults likely to have been committed by the French maid—any person who follows these traces can find his way to the truth as I found mine.

Returning for a moment to the hopes which I had formed of being of some service to Michael, I have only to say that they were at once destroyed, when I heard of the death by drowning of the man to whom the evidence pointed as his father. The prospect looked equally barren when I thought of the miserable mother. That she should openly acknowledge her son in her position, was perhaps not to be expected of any woman. Had she courage enough, or, in plainer words, heart enough to acknowledge him privately?

I called to mind again some of the apparent caprices and contradictions in Lady Catherine's conduct, on the memorable day when Michael had presented himself to fill the vacant place. Look back with me to the record of what she said and did on that occasion, by the light of your present knowledge, and you will see that his likeness to his father must have struck her when he entered the room, and that his statement of his age must have correctly described the age of her son. Recall the actions that followed—the withdrawal to the window to conceal her face; the clutch at the curtain when she felt herself sinking; the cry, not of terror at a cat, but of recognition of the father's nervous infirmity reappearing in the son; the harshness of manner under which she concealed her emotions when she ventured to speak to him; the reiterated inconsistencies and vacillations of conduct that followed, all alike due to the protest of Nature, desperately resisted to the last—and say if I did her injustice when I believed her to be incapable of running the smallest risk of discovery at the prompting of maternal love.

There remained, then, only Michael to think of. I remembered how he had spoken of the unnatural parents whom he neither expected nor cared to discover. Still, I could not reconcile it

to my conscience to accept a chance outbreak of temper as my sufficient justification for keeping him in ignorance of a discovery which so nearly concerned him. It seemed at least to be my duty to make myself acquainted with the true state of his feelings, before I decided to bear the burden of silence with me to my grave.

What I felt it my duty to do in this serious matter, I determined to do at once. Besides, let me honestly own that I felt lonely and desolate, oppressed by the critical situation in which I was placed, and eager for the relief that it would be to me only to hear the sound of Michael's voice. I sent my maid to say that I wished to speak to him immediately. The crisis was already hanging over my head. That one act brought it down.

XI.

He came in, and stood modestly waiting at the door.

After making him take a chair, I began by saying that I had received his message, and that, acting on my uncle's advice, I must abstain from interfering in the question of his leaving, or not leaving, his place. Having in this way established a reason for him, I alluded next to the loss that he had sustained, and asked if he had any prospect of finding out the person who had entered his room in his absence. On his reply in the negative, I spoke of the serious results to him of the act of destruction that had been committed. "Your last chance of discovering your parents," I said, "has been cruelly destroyed."

He smiled sadly. "You know already, Miss, that I never expected to discover them."

I ventured a little nearer to the object I had in view.

"Do you never think of your mother?" I asked. "At your age, she might be still living. Can you give up all hope of finding her, without feeling your heart-ache?"

"If I have done her wrong, in believing that she deserted me," he answered, "the heart-ache is but a poor way of expressing the remorse that I should feel."

I ventured nearer still. "Even if you were right," I began—"even if she did desert you—"

He interrupted me sternly. "I would not cross the street to see her," he said. "A woman who deserts her child is a monster. Forgive me for speaking so, miss. When I see good mothers and their children, it maddens me when I think of what my childhood was."

Hearing those words, and watching him attentively while he spoke, I could see that my silence would be a mercy, not a crime. I hastened to speak of other things. "If you decide to leave us," I said, "when shall you go?"

His eyes softened instantly. Little by little the color faded out of his face as he answered me.

"The General kindly said, when I spoke of leaving my place—" His voice faltered, and he paused to steady it. "My master," he resumed, "said that I need not keep my new employer waiting by staying for the customary month, provided—provided you were willing to dispense with my services."

So far, I had succeeded in controlling myself. At that reply, I felt my resolution failing me. I saw how he suffered; I saw how manfully he struggled to conceal it. All my heart went out to him, in spite of me.

"I am not willing," I said. "I am sorry—very, very sorry to lose you. But I will do anything that is for your good. I can say no more."

He rose suddenly, as if to leave the room; mastered himself; stood for a moment silently looking at me—then looked away again, and said his parting words.

"If I succeed, Miss Mina, in my new employment—if I get on perhaps to higher things—is it—is it presuming too much, to ask if I might, some day—perhaps when you are out riding alone—if I might speak to you—only to ask if you are well and happy—"

He could say no more. I saw the tears in his eyes; saw him shaken by the convulsive breathings which break from men in the rare moments when they cry. He forced it back even then. He bowed to me—oh, God, he bowed to me, as if he were only my servant! as if he were too far below me to take my hand, even at that moment! I could have endured anything else; I believe I could still have restrained myself under any other circumstances. It matters little now; my confession must be made, whatever you may think of me. I flew to him like a frenzied creature—I threw my arms round his neck—I said to him, "Oh, Michael, don't you know that I love you?" And then I laid my head on his breast, and held him to me, and said no more.

In that moment of silence, the door of the room was opened. I started, and looked up. Lady Catherine was standing on the threshold.

I saw in her face that she had been listening—she must have followed him when he was on his way to my room. That conviction steadied me. I took his hand in mine, and stood side by side with him, waiting for her to speak first. She looked at Michael, not at me. She advanced a step or two, and addressed him in these words: "It is just possible that you have some sense of decency left. Leave the room."

That deliberate insult was all I wanted to make me completely mistress of myself. I told Michael to wait a moment, and opened my writing-desk. I wrote on an envelope the address in London of a faithful old servant who had attended my mother in her last moments. I gave it to Michael. "Call there to-morrow morning," I said. "You will find me waiting for you."

He looked at Lady Catherine, evidently unwilling to leave me alone with her. "Fear nothing," I said; "I am old enough to take care of myself. I have only a word to say to this lady before I leave the house." With that, I took his arm, and walked with him to the door, and said good-bye almost as composedly as if we had been husband and wife already.

Lady Catherine's eyes followed me as I shut the door again, and crossed the room to a second door which led into my bed-chamber. She suddenly stepped up to me, just as I was entering the room, and laid her hand on my arm.

"What do I see in your face?" she asked, as much of herself as of me—with her eyes fixed in keen inquiry on mine.

"You shall know directly," I answered.

"Let me get my bonnet and cloak first."

"Do you mean to leave the house?"

"I do."

She rang the bell. I quietly dressed myself, to go out.—The servant answered the bell, as I returned to the sitting-room.

"Tell your master I wish to see him instantly," said Lady Catherine.

"My master has gone out, my lady."

"To his club?"

"I believe so, my lady."

"I will send you with a letter to him. Come back when I ring again." She turned to me as the man withdrew. "Do you refuse to stay here until the General returns?"

"I shall be happy to see the General, if you will enclose my address in your letter to him."

Replying in those terms, I wrote the address for the second time. Lady Catherine knew perfectly well, when I gave it to her, that I was going to a respectable house kept by a woman who had nursed me when I was a child.

"One last question," she said. "Am I to tell the General that it is your intention to marry your groom?"

Her tone stung me into making an answer which I regretted the moment it had passed my lips.

"You can put it more plainly, if you like," I said. "You can tell the General that it is my intention to marry *your son*."

She was near the door, on the point of leaving me. As I spoke, she turned with a ghastly stare of horror—felt about her with her hands as if she was groping in darkness—and dropped senseless on the floor.

I instantly summoned help. The women-servants carried her to my bed. While they were restoring her to herself, I wrote a few lines telling the miserable woman how I had discovered her secret.

"Your husband's tranquility," I added, "is as precious to me as my own. As for your son, you know what he thinks of the parents who deserted him. Your secret is safe in my keeping—safe from your husband, safe from your son, to the end of my life."

I sealed up those words, and gave them to her with my own hand when she had come to herself again. I never heard from her in reply. I have never seen her from that time to this. She knows she can trust me.

And what did my good uncle say, when we next met? I would rather report what he did, when he got the better of his first feelings of anger and surprise on hearing of my contemplated marriage. He kissed me on my wedding-day; and he gave my husband the appointment which places us both in an independent position for life.

This is my shocking story, Madam. This is how I disgraced myself by marrying my groom.

NOTHING EXTRAORDINARY.

Colonel W. K. Stuart tells the following story of a Scotch subaltern at Gibraltar: The latter was one day on guard with another officer who, unfortunately, fell down a precipice 400 feet, and was killed. Non-military readers should understand that in the guard reports there is a small addendum, viz., "N.B.—Nothing extraordinary since guard mounting," the meaning of which is that, in case anything particular should occur, the officer commanding the guard is bound to mention it. Our friend, however, said nothing about the accident that had occurred to his brother officer, and, some hours after, the brigade major came to his quarters, on the part of the officer commanding, with the report in his hand, to demand an explanation. The brigade major, addressing him, said: "You say, sir, in your report, 'N.B.—Nothing extraordinary since guard mounting,' when your brother officer, on duty with you, has fallen down a precipice 400 feet and been killed." "Well, sir," replied B—, "I dinna think there's anything extraordinary in it ava; if he'd faun doon a precipice 400 feet and no been killed, I should hae thought it very extraordinary indeed, and wad hae put it doon in my report."

EXPERIENCE.—To do the same thing over and over again for years without heart or improvement may indeed be called experience; but it is a profitless one. Some people who are proudest of boasting of their experience have the least reason to be proud of it. To have spent ten or twenty years in the same pursuit does not, of itself, entitle a man to respect and honour; but to have spent as many months in steadfast progress, to have brought to bear upon his employment all his past training, to have put into it fresh thought and renewed vigour, to have made experiments, studied methods, and planned improvements—that is an experience we justly esteem.