

who was carrying on an animated conversation with a Russian prince with a star upon his breast, seemed by reason of her husband's rank to be far above her, and more in her fitting sphere than she was.

Gordon, who had been threatening to leave every day for the past week, also seemed quite in his natural element, and exchanged remarks freely with starred plenipotentiaries and decorated heroes.

"Lady H—, I think I should like to go home!" Stannie whispered.

"Why?—are you ill?" demanded her ladyship, in affright. "How very unfortunate! If you had a glass of wine don't you think you could stay a little longer? The Grand Duke and Duchess are coming by-and-by! Do try and stay until they arrive!"

"I am not ill; but I feel so insignificant and out of place!"

"What can you mean?" said her ladyship, laughing. "Such humility is as refreshing as it is uncommon in these days! Why, you are not at Court here any more than when you are at a reception in my house. You don't feel so abject there?"

"No; but there were more English, and I knew you a little. Can't I go home?"

"Quite impossible, unless you become really ill! When the dancing commences you will be all right. I had no idea that you were so shy. Rest assured that no one considers you the least person here to-night!"

"What splendid dresses and diamonds some of the ladies have on!" said Stannie, plucking up courage to glance around her again.

"Yes; some pretty good diamonds!" said her companion, glancing at her own costly sapphires as she spoke. "But the women are very ugly—all foreign women are. Our English Countess over there, the vivacious Lotty, puts them all in the shade. Ah, Mr. Hunter! I thought you would be here to-night. Is this positively your last appearance?"

"Positively. I am really going to-morrow night. Why doesn't the dancing begin?"

"I suppose they are waiting for the party from the palace."

"Here they are, then!" said Gordon; and everyone rose to their feet as the royal visitors entered.

"They look just like any other old lady and gentleman in a room," said Stannie, in a disappointed voice.

"Whatever did you expect them to be like?" asked Lady H—. "Did you imagine they would come in coronation robes with crowns upon their heads? The Grand Duchess has worn that crimson velvet and old point a dozen times, to my knowledge. She is a charming woman. I daresay she will ask to be introduced when she finds out that you are here. Madame Berg and she have been great cronies for years. Do you feel better now?"

"Are you ill?" asked Gordon, looking at her anxiously.

"Seriously ill—at ease," answered Lady H—. "She was overpowered by the array of aristocracy around her. After all, it is nothing to what one sees in London. I have been at a hundred better dances there. Wirtstadt is only a little toy Court."

"But I have never been in London, that makes all the difference, and I think Wirtstadt a most imposing place."

"The dancing is going to commence at last. The musicians in the gallery are making preparations. What a pity that lovely dress of yours has such an unlimited tail, my dear!"

"Oh, the train will be easily managed, if—"

"If what?"

"If anybody should ask me to dance."

"You are not likely to be a wallflower, I think."

The ambassadress was right: the beautiful *prima donna* was certainly the belle of that assemblage, and was not able to escape a single dance.

"I am so tired," she said, two hours later, to Gordon, happening to find herself near him for an instant.

"Indeed!" answered that gentleman, rather savagely. "He was not even pretending to enjoy himself. One short waltz with Stannie and another with his sister had been the extent of his dancing, and he had passed the rest of the evening wandering listlessly from one room to another, and surveying the brilliant scene with jaundiced eyes. He actually frowned when Stannie, flushed and animated, swept past him once in the mazes of the dance."

If he had dared he would have dragged her from the encircling grasp of the young Graf, who was at that moment realizing one of his day-dreams.

"Ever since Miss Ross had taken the town by storm he had been vainly endeavouring to obtain an introduction. He had not hitherto found it difficult to make the acquaintance of operatic stars; but this Scotch girl was something different from all the rest; he did not dare even to send her a bouquet. A friend of his had ventured to send his servant with one, and the man had been politely informed that Miss Ross accepted flowers out of the theatre only from her own friends. There was no alternative but to take the rejected blossoms back to his master, who promptly threw them out of the window. The Graf had resigned himself to his disappointment, and worshipped her afar off, when lo! he met her on his own ground."

Perhaps he did not, to himself, quite admit that a singer was his equal. But for the time

being she was. It seemed unlikely, when the longed-for introduction was obtained, that he would gain much advantage by it; but, taking compassion on his earnestness, Stannie ran her pencil through a name which was down twice upon her card, and sent him away rejoicing.

Her cup of pleasure was full to the brim, and running over. She no longer wished to glide quietly from the ball-room and run home. She knew she was the queen of the night, and would not have been human if her heart had not thrilled with gratified pride. The Grand Duke and Duchess did not remain long, but, before leaving, they requested an introduction, and, in a few well-chosen words, they both expressed the intense pleasure which her singing had afforded them, and wished her every success in her career.

"Shall you be busy to-morrow forenoon?" asked Gordon, when he bade her good night at the carriage door.

"Up till two o'clock. After that I shall be free until the evening."

"I will call at half-past two, then. I wish particularly to speak to you before I leave."

"I will be at home then, and will have the babies' rattles packed in a little box for you to take over. Has not this been a glorious evening?"

"Ah! pretty well. Glad you have liked it."

"Liked it? I should think I had! It has been perfectly delicious!"

"Good night. Good night, Lady H—, and good-bye as well."

## CHAPTER XXVI.

## IT CANNOT BE.

"Is your answer final, Stannie?"

"Yes."

"Will you not reconsider it?"

"No. If I were to consider it for a year, it would be the same. I shall never marry."

"Never! That's a great deal to say. You will change one day."

"I shall not change. I have chosen my life, and mean to adhere to it. My work is planned out for years to come. It is my other, higher state of existence. I am sorry, very sorry, if you are disappointed, Gordon; but can't you see that it would never do? I have no love to bestow on any man; it is all given to my art."

"And you think that you are happy?"

"I know that I am."

"I shall come again in a year; maybe you will listen to me then."

"Come when you will, but it must be upon the old footing. Regard me as a sister, and I will love you as I would a brother, if I had one, but nothing else—it cannot be."

"A sister?" said Gordon, contemptuously; "no, indeed! I shall not accept a sister's affection from you. It must be something more, or nothing."

"Then it must be nothing," said Stannie, softly.

"I thought you had a heart."

"I hope I have," she answered; "but I cannot force it into loving anyone."

"You will change your mind yet; I know you will. I don't mean in regard to myself; you seem decisive enough upon that point. I was a fool to imagine that you could ever for me. If you knew how sincerely I have loved you since the first day I saw you first, I think you would have a little compassion for me."

"So I have; but not the sort of compassion that you would accept. I am sorry that you have spoiled the old pleasant life. I have always enjoyed your visits here, and looked forward to them so much. Now, because I will not humour a fancy which would burden you with an unsuitable wife, you are going away with the threat that you will never return."

"I wished to take you away from this unreal life, which has cast such a glamour over you. I cannot bear to see you with all that rabble night after night. Those people with whom you are thrown into daily contact are not fit to breathe the same air with you."

"What?" asked Stannie, looking at him as if she had not heard aright.

"Once more I implore you to have done with them. Give up this frightful profession of yours, and be my wife. Is my home not beautiful enough to please you?"

"It is not a question of homes, but of hearts. You judge my friends wrongly. I shall not give them up. You will get over this folly soon. Come and tell me when you have done so; until then, good-bye."

He would not take the hand which she held out to him; he could not have done it had it been to save his life.

She looked at him for an instant as he sat with drooping head, seemingly seeing nothing but the brown and golden stripes of the tiger's skin beneath his feet, and then she went softly from the room.

Gordon rose to his feet when she left him, and looked around the room—her room—for the last time.

Everything seemed to reflect her image. Her feet had pressed the soft skins upon the floor, her fingers had swept the ivory keys of the piano not an hour ago, she had toyed with the fan which was lying on the couch beside him.

In that last glance the place was fixed on his memory for time to come. It was there she had driven all blissful illusions from his life, and let him know that he must forego its better part.

Some men might have smiled, and said to

themselves, "Let her go—I do not care;" but he could not do that, for alas! he did care, and let himself out as he had done well-nigh a hundred times before, and walked quickly to the Austrian Embassy, to bid his sister good-bye.

The Countess was busy packing. Their holiday was over, and she and her husband were to leave on the following day.

She came into the room with a gay speech upon her lips, which died away when she saw her brother's troubled countenance.

"My goodness, Gordon! have you seen a ghost?"

"Yes."

"How interesting! Where have you been?"

"I have just come from Stansmore Ross."

"Ah, I see!"

And the brother and sister looked at each other.

"I understand," said Lotty, softly.

"I did not intend that you or anyone else should know, but it is as well—it will explain what might have seemed strange to you later."

"I am very sorry."

"I shall never return to Wirtstadt, and wish that I had never seen the place."

"She will not be here always."

"I suppose not. Well, I must keep out of her way."

"Of course, she would say 'No.'"

"Why, of course, Lotty."

"Because she is in the full swing of her first popularity. You have ruined your own cause by speaking too soon. It might have been very different if you had waited, say, three years."

"I could not, and it would have made no difference. She says that she shall never marry anyone."

"Oh, rubbish!" said the Countess. "I don't believe a word of it. She won't for a while, that's certain. Keep up your heart, brother. Wait, and then ask her again."

"No; I know better than to do that. She does not love me, and never will!"

"Then don't think another instant about her. She is beautiful, and clever, and nice; but if she doesn't and won't love you, don't fret about it. These things are beyond our control, Gordon. Efface her from your mind; don't be like a child crying for the moon."

"Your advice is not very comforting, Lotty."

"I am as vexed as can be. I saw where your eyes were all the time last night. I would have warned you had I dared to do so."

"Any messages for home, dear?" asked Gordon, abruptly changing the conversation.

"None. My love to them all."

"Is Eily Blennerhasset still with mamma?"

"Gordon, don't!" said his sister, entreatingly.

"Don't what, Lottchen?"

"You know what I mean."

"Is she?"

"Yes; don't be rash; don't let your heart rebound like an india-rubber ball; be true to yourself. Would you offer Eily an empty, disappointed heart? Oh, Gordon!"

"I daresay she likes me a little?"

"Undoubtedly she does."

"Well, I like her. I can never marry the woman I love; why not Eily?"

"Would you be happy afterwards?"

"I am sure I should not."

"Gordon, dear," said the young Countess, "have patience. Eily is a dear, good girl; deal fairly by her. A year hence the wound in your heart will be healed over. Then ask her to be your wife, if you will. It would be an unmanly thing to offer any woman a counterfeit affection!"

He made no reply, but her words did their work.

He crossed the Channel, and went direct to his great empty home at Cumrie, and many a day came and went before he whispered words of love to a woman again.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

## MRS. MACTAVISH WRITES A LETTER.

"I am so tired I can scarcely speak."

"You need a rest, Miss Ross. You have been working too hard."

"I don't think so. All the same, I am glad that I have not to sing this evening," answered Stannie, lying wearily back in her chair. "The truth is, Madame Muller, I am anxious because I have not heard from home for nearly six weeks now. I fear something serious must have happened to Uncle Alan."

"That's a long time, certainly. Perhaps he has been very busy."

"He couldn't be too busy to write to me, if he were well."

"Would not Mr. Hunter have let you know had such been the case?"

"No," said Stannie, blushing hotly as she recalled their last interview. "Mr. Hunter has never been in the habit of writing to me. Besides, he would not be likely to know. Cumrie is a long way from St. Breeda."

Madame Muller left her, and Stannie closed her eyes to think.

Gradually her mind drifted step by step from one thing to another, until she landed all at once, as the fairy tales say, in the church of St. Breeda.

She had fallen asleep, and in her dream stood in the broad aisle of the venerable building. Mr. Graem was in the pulpit in his Geneva gown and bands; the Principal nodded in his accustomed place. But his blood were all scattered; he was the sole occupant of the once well-

filled pew. Could his kind-hearted spouse be amongst the silent worshippers outside? The Macphersons were all there, and the miller, with his apple-cheeked, tow-headed offspring, and twenty others at least whom she recognized; but Professor Neil's place was empty, and it seemed to her that now and then Mr. Graem glanced sadly at the vacant seat.

"I can't remain here," she thought. "I must go and find Uncle Alan."

So she left the church, and went her way across the gravelled walks.

College Bounds was as deserted as if it had been the month of July or August. Not a human being was visible up and down the whole street; the students in their red gowns had vanished as effectually as if an invading army had annihilated the last one of them. A stray cat ran along the top of a garden wall, then suddenly dropped into retirement on the other side; a dignified turkey cock, which had extended its peregrinations from a neighbouring farm-yard, pranced majestically along the narrow pavement, and regarded the scene of still life with well bred contempt. The blinds were all drawn in the Professor's house, and the place wore a neglected air. She put her hand upon the door-handle, and it yielded to her touch, and entered.

Her light footfall sounded strangely through the rooms as she hurriedly passed from one to the other. The ashes were still in the grates, and various things were lying about as if they had been used quite recently. The Professor's books lay upon the table, the chairs, and the floor, as of old; but the dust lay thick upon their leaves and covers. His reading lamp, with the green shade, stood upon the table; but it was untripped, and destitute of oil. His shippers, sadly down at the heels, lay carelessly kicked aside upon the hearthrug, and a pair of spectacles, which had dropped possibly from his pocket, were lying near them. She gazed around her, wondering and frightened, and then called aloud, "Uncle Alan, where are you?"

But only a mocking echo answered her. "Janet—Janet Scott, it is I, Stannie, come home again! Where are you all?"

But the old housekeeper, ever ready to run at her favourite's beck and call, came not.

"Uncle!" she called again. "Where can you be? It is growing dark, and I am afraid, all alone in the house!"

Then she sat down and wept.

"Hush, dear hush! Wake up. You have been asleep and dreaming; a bad dream, surely, to cause those tears," said Madame Muller, taking both her hands tenderly within her own.

"You cannot have been asleep long; it is only ten minutes since I went to fetch your tea. Here it is. Drink a little; it will do you good."

"Are you sure that it was only a dream?" asked Stannie, sobbing violently. "I am so glad!"

"What was it, dear?"

Stannie related it, and Madame then said, "It is all extremely simple. What has been weighing upon our minds during the day come back to us in distorted visions when we are asleep. You have been vexing yourself for weeks about a letter, and imagining all manner of improbable things. Naturally, the sun thoughts haunt you in your dreams."

"How wretched the place looked! I saw it as distinctly as I see the room here. If I don't hear to night, I shall telegraph to Mr. Graem. I wish I had done so before."

"Here is your letter," exclaimed Madame Muller, as a sharp double knock was heard.

Stannie sprang up to snatch it from the servant's hand, spilling her cup of tea, and upsetting a plate of bread and butter upon the floor in her eagerness.

"Oh, dear, dear!" she cried, tossing it aside. "Such a disappointment! It is not from home yet. The post-mark is Edinburgh. I am sure I don't know any person there."

"Will you not read your letter, Miss Ross?" suggested Madame Muller, a few minutes later. Stannie seated herself in the same listless attitude, and had evidently forgotten all about it.

"There may be some news in it."

"There may. I can't imagine why anybody in Edinburgh should write to me. What a bold hand—and a seal to match! A dropical M."

she said, breaking it with an air of one who expected nothing of an interesting nature to reward her trouble.

Madame Muller left the room, carrying the tea-things with her. When she returned, Stannie was still reading the letter.

She looked up, and quietly asked, "What o'clock is it, Madame Muller?"

"Ten minutes past nine exactly."

"When does the train start—the one which goes through Belgium direct to Ostend?"

"At midnight."

"Will you kindly pack up a few things for me, just what I can carry in a dressing-bag and small portmanteau? I am going by that train."

"Miss Ross!—going! Where?"

"To Edinburgh, I suppose. I had better put on a warmer dress," she added, glancing down at the folds of her light silk.

"Going to Edinburgh! Why, may I ask?"

"You had better read this letter. I knew there must be something wrong; I knew it before I fell asleep, and dreamt that horrid dream. I was quite prepared for it, but I don't think that I deserve the hard things she says to me. But do read the letter; it will explain everything."

(To be continued.)