

blame. Gentlemen don't do these things without encouragement. He is a country boor," burst out Ida, "incapable of taking a hint. I have been all but rude to him, and I call this an insult."

"My difficulties are smoothing themselves," said madame. "That's one trouble off my mind, and one gentleman less for my tea; for of course a forlorn swain won't like to meet heartless young ladies. Ada, I am going to give a croquet tea, and invite all the world. Come over and have a practice, will you?"

"Will I not?" said Ada. "But," she added, hesitating, "you won't have any strangers?"

"Little goose! no," was the reply.

"And there's this horrid letter!" said Ada.

"Sit down and write it first," said madame.

"I'll wait."

Madame sat for some time patiently looking out of the window. Watering-pots, scissors, gloves, and tiny gardening-tools, were scattered here and there on the green turf amongst the flowers, and she smiled at the whimsical carelessness which was so like Ada. Thinking thus, madame turned a furtive look of inquiry as to the progress of the letter, and the smile faded into an expression of puzzled concern. The paper still lay blank before the girl, but Ada's hands were clasped tightly over each other, and her eyes, usually so full of mischief, had a look of intense, wistful sadness in them, which touched madame strangely.

"Ada," she said, going up to her, "you are not happy. There's something that I don't know of to trouble you at times. I am not going to ask questions, so you needn't turn away; but I don't like my sunshine to be dimmed."

"You are very good to me, Madame D'Eyncourt," she said. "One does foolish things sometimes, you know. I am not sure,—that is, not always sure,—that they don't bring their own punishment."

"Ada, it isn't this," said madame. "Only tell me you can't possibly care for—"

"Robert Crewe," said Ada, and she broke into a laugh. It was just one of those sudden changes which madame scarcely understood. "You didn't suppose I was crying about him just now?" continued Ada. "No, no, I was not thinking of anything that can be altered; and do you know it's odd, but I believe if the time were to come over again I should do just the same as I did years ago. It sounds like nonsense to you, doesn't it? Just wait for me five minutes more. I really will finish this terrible letter."

Madame D'Eyncourt saw the pen dipped into the ink, and heard it go scratching rapidly along the paper: she saw also a little flush steal up into the girl's face as the note was written—written at last with a firm hand, and no hesitation, sealed and addressed; and then she saw once more the look of listless sadness come over Ada's face, and heard her say to herself, "I wonder if he cares."

Madame was puzzled. She began to wonder uneasily if there was some one in the background who would come in to upset her plans, or what did it all mean?

The next moment the two were walking together down the pleasant lane, into which, with a hop, skip, and jump, came King Pippin, and flung himself upon Ada, carrying her off to play with him. Madame D'Eyncourt leaned over the gate, and watched them.

It would be the very thing for both," she reflected. "His gravity would be good for her, and her caprices and sudden changes would light up his dull life. But what's to be done in one evening—and in a mixed company of people, all more or less croquet-mad. Is it a mistake, I wonder? I think not; but we shall see."

CHAPTER III.

"I tell you, Lewis, it's going to be a grand success. Look at all those merry faces. Did you ever see a fairer sight? It is just what I like—no stiffness and parade, but plenty of space and opportunity for flirtation; not that I approve of flirtation, of course, in one sense of the word, but it has its good points."

Mr. Barrington looked down into Madame D'Eyncourt's face with an expression of comical helplessness and reproach.

"I can't think how I came to be here," said he; "I had no idea your party was to muster so strong; but they haven't seen me, Maggie. Upon my word, I have a good mind—"

"Now, Lewis, be good," said madame, putting her arm within her cousin's, coaxingly. "Its rather amusing, you know; but I don't believe one of those people who think the idea so charming would have had the courage to carry it out themselves. They would have been afraid of it. Five-o'clock teas have a suspicion of primitiveness about them here. I can fancy old Lady Harding looking at Mrs. Colonel Simpson, and murmuring, 'Very—ah—delightful; but a little odd, don't you think?' And Mrs. Colonel Simpson replies, with admirable *nonchalance*, 'Oh, these things are becoming quite fashionable. Lewis, you will play, to please me?'"

"Never used a mallet in my life, Maggie," said he.

"Oh, but no one will know that," said madame. "It all comes natural. I must just introduce you to a few people, and then you shall see my pearl of price."

"Maggie," said Mr. Barrington, "I do wish you to leave off planning for me. Its quite of no use; I'm a confirmed old fogie. I wonder you don't consider the plagues a little more, too. It may be worth something to them some day to have an old bachelor-uncle."

"Lewis!" said madame; and she looked up at him with a little pettish curl of the lip, and led the way to the lawn. "Hark! what a clash of tongues!" she said. "I am wanted here. I think we won't have umpires, Lewis: its stupid."

Mr. Barrington only shrugged his shoulders with an acknowledgment of lamentable ignorance. And then he underwent a round of introductions, and caught a glance of commiseration from M. D'Eyncourt, who understood the despairing expression with which he looked at the balls and mallets lying about the lawn. Madame D'Eyncourt drew him near to these. A group of young ladies stood amongst them, talking.

"Miss Prescott takes the blue," was the first thing that reached madame's ears. She had a sort of fleeting impression of something, a nervous movement of the arm on which her own rested; and then the group parted, and she proceeded to introduce Mr. Barrington to Ada Prescott.

Madame D'Eyncourt did not pause in her introduction, but she had a startled consciousness of something wrong, as she uttered it. Ada's slight figure was suddenly drawn up with an imperious haughtiness utterly foreign to her; and the face that had been flashing with merriment was as cold and stiff as marble. From her, madame glanced at Mr. Barrington, and saw that he was very pale, and his lips were pressed tightly together. A dead silence followed his low bow; he never raised his eyes from the balls which strewed the ground at his feet, and a sort of uneasy sensation began to steal over the group. Madame D'Eyncourt felt this, and roused herself.

"Come, Lewis," said she, "you must take a ball; that will make up eight, just the number. Here, you shall have pink."

Mr. Barrington took his mallet mechanically, looking at the bit of pink upon it with absent eyes, and taking no notice of the further arrangement of sides. When it came to his turn he followed up the blue ball almost unconsciously, and lit it.

Some one called out, "Help yourself with a splitting stroke, and send blue the wrong side of her hoop. Miss Prescott is an enemy."

Mr. Barrington stood upright, with an involuntary movement, as if to throw down his mallet; then he saw that Ada stood close to him, looking down with chilly indifference for his stroke. The colour came into his cheeks, and he bent his head so that she only heard his words.

"I don't know the game," said he. "Am I fighting for a victory over you?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Its an equal battle," said he; "but I will win. I must win. If I do—"

"That isn't right, Mr. Barrington," shouted some one. "No consultations, please; you are on our side."

Ada turned away, to all appearance as indifferent as ever; but Madame D'Eyncourt detected a slight quivering about her lips, and saw that she struck one foot upon the ground sharply, as a passionate child might have done. The thing was puzzling. It became evident to the players on both sides that there was some strange earnestness in this game, which they caught without understanding it. They, too, got terribly in earnest, not knowing why, and were almost inclined to laugh at the breathless interest with which every stroke was watched. Lewis Barrington had no thought of laughing. The game which had appeared to him so trifling became suddenly a thing of portent—a sort of superstition; and the colour which had come into his cheeks when he spoke to Ada remained there, a token of some strong excitement. Once, during the game, Madame D'Eyncourt found herself near Ada, and spoke,

"I don't understand it," she said. "Have you and Lewis met before?"

"You will please not to speak to me of Mr. Barrington; you see we are enemies," returned Ada, with that new haughtiness, at which madame laughed a little; it was so comical.

"Yes," said she; "but, Ada—"

"You are very good to me generally," said Ada. "Be so now, and ask no questions. You told me there were not to be any strangers."

"My own cousin," began madame; but she was interrupted by a chorus of voices in distress.

"Blue to play. Come down and scatter our enemies, blue, or the game is lost. They are all rovers, and pink plays next."

Again Madame D'Eyncourt looked at Ada in astonishment.

"Why, Ada, how your hand shakes" she said. "What is it?"

"Yes," said Ada, calmly, "its very absurd; but it does shake. I can't help it. There!"

An exclamation of dismay followed the unlucky stroke.

"Wired," said Madame D'Eyncourt; "and pink wins. I thought you couldn't play, Lewis. Didn't I tell you it would come to you naturally?"

Mr. Barrington made some indistinct reply, and turned from the peg.

"You must let me off now, Maggie," he said, very quietly.

"I should like to know what it is all about," said madame. "It appears to me that I have made a failure; but I suppose there's nothing to be done?"

Mr. Barrington shook his head, and walked away. He knew, without looking back, that Ada played on—that she would probably play all the evening; and he wondered vaguely how long it would last, when these stupidly happy people would go away, and what was to be the end of it all. Some one spoke to him from time to time, and he answered mechanically, and got away from them. He stood by the shrubbery gate, and leaned over it in the beautiful misty calm of the Autumn evening, dimly conscious now and then of the distant hum of voices, the sharp clicking of mallets and balls, and by-and-by of the twilight that came creeping over the scene. When would these people go?

"Come and feed the swans, Cousin Lewis?" said a small voice at his elbow. "Miss Prescott and I are going."

"Did she—did Miss Prescott—send you?" said Cousin Lewis, starting.

"Not exactly," was the reply. "What do you think she'd want with you? You're not her cousin. No, she didn't send me."

"Then I can't come, Pippin," said he.

Mr. Barrington stood for some minutes longer by the gate, and then turned to look after the boy, saw him join Ada, and go with her into a side walk leading to the forbidden pool. A shadow darkened Mr. Barrington's face as he watched them; then it grew fixed and resolute. He altered his mind, and followed them. "Sooner