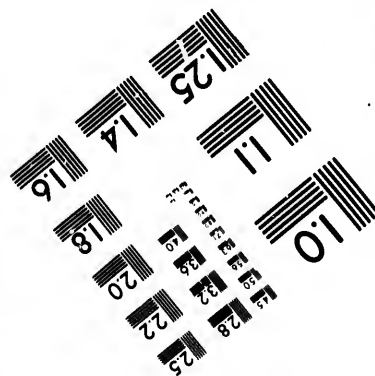
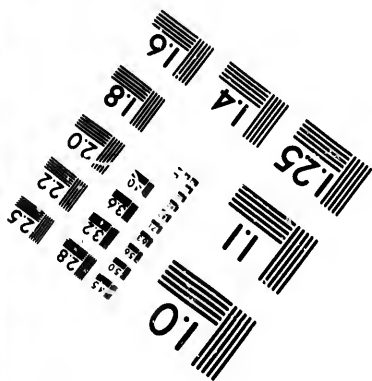
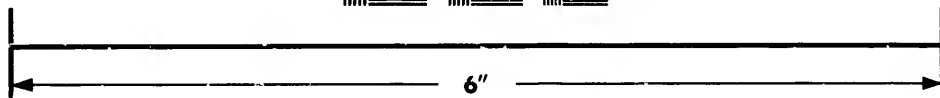
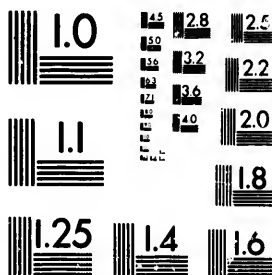


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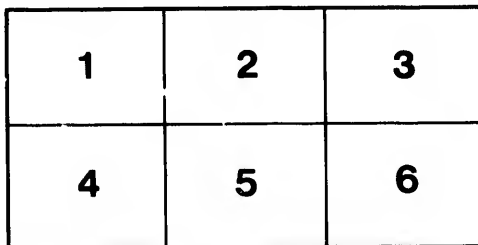
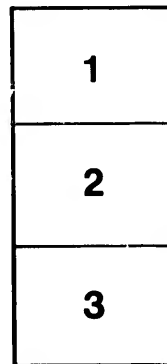
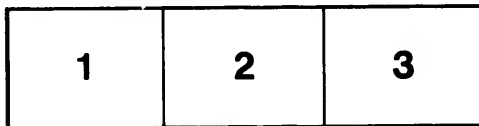
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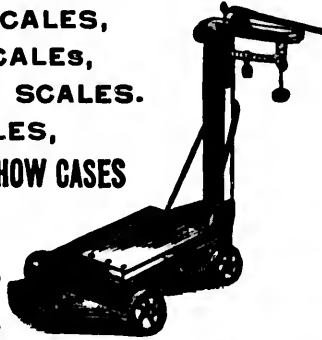
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By RITA,

AUTHOR OF "DAME DURDEN," "LIKE DIAN'S KISS," "A SINLESS SECRET,"  
"FAUSTINE," ETC., ETC.



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# “SHEBA.”

## A STUDY OF GIRLHOOD.

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### CHAPTER I.

#### SWEETHEARTS.

“COO EE—coo-ee—coo-ēē!”

The last syllable was so prolonged and ear-piercing, that a figure almost hidden from sight in a leafy wilderness of tangled shrub and grass, raised itself impatiently on one arm and looked round in the direction of the sound.

The retreat she had discovered for herself was closed in by rough wooden palings, and it was towards an aperture in one of these that a pair of dark sombre eyes flashed their angry challenge.

“Another of you boys! Well, what do *you* want, Ted Sanderson?”

The expression of the face as seen through the palings, was somewhat sheepish and bashful.

“Oh,” said the boy, with affected indifference, “I—I only wanted to say I had brought you something.”

“You might have said it without making such a row,” the girl rejoined crossly. “What have you brought?”

“Oh, only a few peaches.”

“Bobby Burton was here not a quarter-of-an-hour ago,” said the girl, turning away with supreme indifference; “and he brought me a hatful of loquats. I like them much better than peaches. Why, we’ve peaches enough in the garden to supply all Sydney. What’s the use of bringing more?”

“Well, don’t be cross, Sheba. I’ll bring you loquats to-morrow, and, I say, do come a little nearer, I’ve got something else to tell you.”

“Oh, do go away,” cried the girl impatiently. “I’m sick to death of you all! This comes of being the only girl in the place. The moment school is over you all come here and pester my life

out with your nonsense ; I'm not coming any nearer—so there ! it's much too hot to move ; and you'll get a sunstroke if you don't go home."

There was no answer for a moment or two, so concluding that her advice had been taken, the girl turned once more to her book, tossing back a mane of dark curling hair, and leaning her cheeks on either hand, supported by her elbows. The attitude was one of more comfort than grace, and perhaps for that reason commended itself to feminine fourteen, which represents Sheba Ormatroyd with regard to sex and age. For the rest, she was dark, thin, angular and even more precocious than the generality of Australian "Cornstalks," the designation of the white "natives" of the country. But peace was not to be yet. Something came flying over the palings, and, taking its way past shrub and gum tree and all the wild luxuriant tangle of weed and creeper and flower that made the charm of Sheba's "Wilderness," fell almost at her elbow. She drew herself up impatiently ; before her was a folded piece of paper, with a stone inclosed to weight its flight to her. She seized it, and tossing the stone aside, spread out the not over clean scrap and read it.

Not much to read, only five words in a scrawling irregular hand.

"*Will you be my sweetheart?*"

She looked at the missive, and the frown on her brow deepened as she tossed the paper contemptuously aside, and once more turned her attention to her book.

Five minutes passed quickly, then a long low whistle broke the sultry stillness, and a voice cried entreatingly : "Have you read it?"

The girl sprang to her feet. "Yes, of course," she said crossly. "Such rubbish. What on earth do you want to be sweethearts for?"

"Because—well, because I'm awfully fond of you and—and, oh, because all the other boys said you'd never look at me ; and do say 'Yes,' Sheba, and I'll bring you some scent to-morrow. Mother got some to-day from Sydney, and I'll make her give me a bottle of it for you. No one has given you *that*," with a voice of triumph.

"Scent !" said Sheba thoughtfully. "Well, I don't mind ; only don't go and put water into it so as to fill the bottle as you did before ; it was so weak that it didn't make my handkerchief smell a bit, even when I *washed* it in it."

"Yes, I remember," laughed the youthful swain, who numbered fifteen years, but was nearly six feet high. "But say 'Yes' to what I ask, Sheba. You haven't told me yet."

"Yes," said the girl tranquilly. "Of course it's understood the arrangement is only to stand until I get tired of you, and you're only to kiss me once a day when you're quite sure no one's by!"

"Very well; but I may write?"

"If you like, certainly; but what's the use of writing when you can speak to me?"

"Well, you see, writing's just to say sweetheart things; it comes easier when you write."

"Does it?" she said doubtfully, and looked upwards through the sheltering boughs to where the flawless burning blue of the sky spread its brilliant canopy.

"I write," she went on presently, "heaps and heaps of things, but not about sweethearts, only about the stars and the flowers, and why we think, and why God lets us live, and what it will all end in."

"You *are* a funny girl," said the young swain admiringly. "However, that's settled; I made up my mind I would ask you to-day and I've done it. What are you reading there?"

"Roman history," said Sheba, seating herself on the soft tangle of grass and creeper that formed her nest.

"It's awfully dry, isn't it?" said the boy. "What makes you read it?"

"Because I like it for one thing, and because I've nothing else for another. Mother has a lot of books locked up in the bookcase, but she'll never let me read one of them. Oh," clasping her hands round her knees and raising the great sombre, passionate eyes to the wide blue heavens, "what I wouldn't give to have books—hundreds and thousands of books! Books to read from morning till night. All the great thoughts of great men and women! I think sometimes it's like a fever in me, this craze for reading, and I suppose," she added mournfully, "it will never be satisfied—never! At least, as long as I stop here."

"Perhaps," said Ted soothingly, "you won't stop here always."

"Oh," she cried passionately, "I hope not, I hope not. I do so want to see the world. I should like to go everywhere; to do everything. But what's the use of talking, we're horribly poor, and always will be, I suppose; and though I've rich relations in England they're never likely to trouble their heads about *me*. As for taking me travelling, phew—w." She gave a low, long, peculiar whistle, and a look of comical resignation came over her face. "I suppose you won't be rich, Ted?" she added speculatively.

"I don't know," said the boy. "I may. Lots of squatters are. But then it takes time."

"Yes," said Sheba, "so it does, and I suppose when I am old I won't feel quite so keen about things as I do now. I wouldn't mind marrying you if you were rich, Ted; that's to say if you would let me have my own way in everything. I never get it at home, so when I make a change I should like it to be to my advantage."

"Wouldn't you marry me before I was rich?" asked the boy eagerly. "I'd try to get on so much harder if I had you with me. I've always been so fond of you, you know, Sheba, only I was afraid to tell you, for you do snap at the boys so, and you never seemed to care about any one except Hex."

"It would be odd," said Sheba disdainfully, "if I didn't care for my own brother. Don't talk nonsense, Ted; and really, you had better go home now, for it's nearly tea-time, and I must go in and make it. Mother has one of her bad headaches, and the new servant who came from Sydney last night is as ignorant as a pig."

"All right; I'm going. When shall I see you again?"

"Oh," said the girl indifferently, "I'm generally here in the afternoons."

"But then there's the palings," he objected.

She laughed; the laugh was a charming one, clear and sweet as silver bells and with the ring of pure heart-whole youth in it.

"What of that? I can talk to you just as well through them, as within them."

"Well, come nearer now; you know we're sweethearts, so you might let me have a kiss."

The girl walked straight up to the palings, her eyes dancing with mischief and laughter. Then she thrust one small brown hand through the aperture. "Kiss that," she said, "it will do for to-day."

"No, thank you," said Ted huffily. "Any one can kiss hands; it's only a mark of respect."

"You should be ashamed," said Sheba, "to say you don't respect your sweetheart!"

She turned away and marched off in quite a dignified manner, leaving her young swain utterly disconcerted. Seeing that there was no likelihood of her return, Ted took his departure also, looking somewhat sulky and depressed. He was scarcely out of sight when the girl came running back. She had forgotten her Roman history. She stooped and picked up the book and was once more retreating when a soft low-breathed "Coo-ee," made her turn to the opening in the palings. Another face, round, rosy, boyish, was staring at her.

"Sheba," came a voice of entreaty from the new-comer, "come here, do; just a minute. I've something to tell you."

"Bobby Burton, one," said the girl; "Ted Sanderson, two; Felix Short, three. Now pray what is your—something?"

"It's real news!" said the boy eagerly. "You *will* be astonished. Not a soul knows it yet, but me and Mr. Crawley; he told me just as I was coming out of school."

"Well, what is it?" asked Sheba, coming nearer, but with no apparent interest in face or voice. She was used to the "boys" and their wonderful pieces of news, which somehow when imparted always fell short of actual novelty.

"Will you give me a kiss if I tell you?"

"Certainly not," she said scornfully. "I hate kissing!"

"Well," he said, somewhat abashed, "here it is; you know the Crow's Nest, that old dreary tumble-down looking place in the hollow, a mile down the road?"

"Yes, of course. What about it?"

"Some one is coming to live there. Only fancy! a gentleman from England and a lot of girls. There, now, Miss Sheba, won't your nose be put out of joint; you'll no longer be the only one."

"You are a very vulgar boy," said Sheba with dignity; "but if your news is true it's about the only thing worth hearing that I've ever heard you say. Girls—oh!" and she clasped her hands in ecstasy, "how lovely. How many of them?"

"About six, I believe," said her informant. "You don't mean to say you're really glad?"

"Do I ever say anything I *don't* mean?" asked Sheba with scorn. "You know that's why I am always called disagreeable."

"I never called you *that*," said the boy eagerly.

"No, I don't think you did; not that it would have mattered. Now I wonder if this is true. What's the name of the people?"

"Saxton, I believe. English people have rum names."

The girl laughed. "Are not ours of English origin? I'm sure mine's funny enough. What's that you're holding under your arm all this time?"

"It's—it's—something for you."

"Oh," said Sheba indifferently, "the third 'something.' Well, what's yours?"

"A book," answered the boy.

"A book!" Her whole face glowed and changed. "Oh, you dear Felix! you're the best of the lot. Let me see it. What's the name?"

"It's a lovely book," he said, "but I'll only give it you on one condition."



"What's that?"

"That you'll be my sweetheart."

"Oh, dear," cried the girl in comic despair, "what has come over you all? Why you're the third who's asked me this afternoon. I can't be everybody's sweetheart. Why didn't you come sooner? I've promised Ted Sanderson now, and he's going to bring me some scent to-morrow. Won't it do if I promise to be your sweetheart next?"

"No, thank you," said Felix sturdily. "Ted's a big fellow, but I'm as good as he any day, and I'm much fonder of you."

"How can you tell that?" asked Sheba speculatively. "You can't possibly know how fond he is."

"He can't be as fond as I am," reiterated the third admirer. "It's not possible. Haven't I been after you for all this last year? and I saved up my money to buy you this book because I heard you say you'd like to read it. It's the 'Arabian Nights,' and full of pictures—there!"

The girl turned pale; her breath came short and eager with intense excitement.

"Oh, Felix, is it really? How good of you. There's nothing almost I wouldn't give you for that book, but I can't break my promise; it wouldn't be right."

"I suppose not," said Felix loftily, "so I won't trouble you any more. I wish you joy of your great lumbering Cornstalk. You've made a nice choice. Scent! What's scent? Just a sniff or two and then it's all gone; but a book—and a book like this—why you could read it over and over again and never be tired."

"I know," said Sheba despairingly, "but I can't help it. Good-bye, Felix, you had better give it to one of the new girls. There'll be sweethearts enough for you all now. I hope I shall have a little peace."

She turned away; her eyes were full of tears. The disappointment of that moment was in its way as keen and hard to bear as any sorrow of later life, by which it may look trivial.

The boy stood and watched her, and his face softened. He glanced at the book in his hand and then at the slight girl's figure moving away with downbent head, and slow and halting step.

"Sheba," he called hesitatingly; "I say, Sheba!"

She stopped and looked back. "Well?" she said languidly.

"Here, come back. You shall have the book. I got it for you and it seems a shame to disappoint you. There, cheer up, old girl; I hate to see you cry. But you'll give me a kiss now, won't you?"

"I'd give you a hundred," cried Sheba gratefully, "only I

mustn't kiss any one else so long as I'm sweethearts with Ted. You know that's the rule."

"Oh, bother Ted," cried the boy angrily. "I'll fight him on Monday after school. Here, take your book."

He flung the precious volume down at her feet and ran off, while the girl, flushed and radiant, flung herself full length down on the crushed grass, and tearing the paper wrappings from the coveted book, plunged straightway into the wondrous and not too moral introduction to the marvellous stories of the "Arabian Nights."

She devoured page after page, history after history, oblivious of time. She might have remained in her hiding-place till dark, had not an interruption occurred at last which had the effect of bringing her down from her realms of enchantment with startling rapidity.

A light form, graceful as a young fawn, came bounding through the tangled underwood, and a cold nose was rubbed against her cheek and startled her from her absorbed attitude.

She sprang hastily up. "Billy," she cried, "good gracious, how have you found me?"

It was a beautiful young goat, milk-white save for the long silky brown ears, that was rubbing its head against her cotton gown, and uttering feeble little bleats of ecstasy. His presence sufficed to rouse Sheba to some sense of the passage of time, and fondling the pretty playful creature with one hand she picked up her books with the other, and ran off down a narrow foot-track, the goat by her side.

The track wound its way through a perfect wilderness of uncultivated ground, until at last it ended at some broken palings which made a gap large enough for the girl to enter. She climbed through and the goat sprang after her. She was now in a wide cleared space, sheltered and surrounded by towering gum trees. Before her was a low rambling house, built of stone, with a wide verandah running round it.

A stone passage ran through from front to back; the rooms opened off it on either side, and gave egress to the verandah by means of long windows which reached to the ground. The kitchen was not attached to the house, but stood a few yards off. A boy was standing in the back doorway and hailed Sheba as she came in sight.

"Where have you been all this time? Do you know it's six o'clock?"

"Is it really?" cried the girl in trepidation. "Is father home yet?"

"No, you may thank your lucky stars he isn't, and mother's asleep. Where were you?"

"Only in the wilderness; but Felix Short brought me a book. Oh, Hex, it's so lovely; the 'Arabian Nights,' only fancy!"

"Phooh!" rejoined Hex indifferently. "Books again. What on earth makes you so fond of them? That's why you forgot about tea. Well, go and make it now. There's only cold meat for father, but if Sally hasn't cooked the potatoes properly you'll catch it. And, I say, put out some melon jam for me, there's a good girl; I'm sick of peach. Here, Billy, Billy; just look at him following you into the house! He's like a dog. By-the-way, do you know Vic has got pups—four such beauties. I found them."

"We'll go and see them after tea," said Sheba, disappearing down the passage to leave her precious books safe in her own room. She flung off her broad shady hat, seized a brush and made some sort of effort at tidying her rebellious locks, and then rushed into the one sitting-room of the house to prepare the tea. In ten minutes it was ready, and Sheba and her brother went out into the verandah to watch for their father's return.

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## CHAPTER II.

### A NEW ARRIVAL.

THE wide verandah, with its slanting wooden roof, and pillars almost covered in the luxurious meshes of passion flower and Cape jessamine, constituted the chief "living room" of the family for most of the year. It led into a garden partially cultivated, and separated from the road by the usual wooden palings. Beyond the road stretched a vast tract of uncultivated country, melting away into dark depths of forest, broken here and there by patches of "scrub" and dark gullies, while farther again, like a dim line against the bright horizon, ran an irregular chain of mountains, the subject of much speculation on the part of Sheba Ormatroyd, who had heard many weird and terrible tales of those mountains from friendly blacks, or wandering squatters.

As she stood now, leaning on the low wooden rails of the verandah, her eyes wandered to that far-off blue line. How near it looked, and yet how many hundreds of miles it was away! That was the worst of Australia, she thought. Everything was so vast, and so large, and so far off, it would take half a life-time to explore it all. She sighed and turned to the goat, which was nibbling the green leaves by her side. She had had the creature

from a tiny kid, and brought it up by dint of great care and trouble, and now it was her constant companion and followed her about like a dog, being, indeed, as docile and intelligent as any member of the canine race. She fondled its pretty ears now, and talked to it softly and caressingly, while a flock of pigeons came fluttering down from the eaves, and one snowy fantail perched itself on her shoulder and cooed sweetly in her ear. Sheba loved all dumb creatures with an almost passionate intensity. To live and breathe was to her a sufficient reason for lavishing devotion, and bird and beast and even insects came in for a share of that large-hearted and protective tenderness which is inherent in some feminine natures.

"Do you know, Hex," she said at last, as her feathered pets began to seek their roost with the decline of the sun, "do you know that the Crow's Nest has been taken at last?"

"Has it?" said her brother eagerly. "Who told you?"

"Felix; and he heard it from the schoolmaster. The people have come from England, he says. There is an old gentleman and a lot of girls."

"Girls!" said Hex with contempt; "and from England! What on earth will they do in the bush?"

"You can't exactly call this the bush," said Sheba. "Every one says it will be quite a town, one day. With a church, and a school, and a store and a lot of houses, it's very different to most places. Look at Tanilba now."

"Oh, of course, that's a few degrees worse," said Hex. "But I'm so sick of this wretched place. I'd like to live in Sydney, or Melbourne, or Bathurst."

"I wouldn't," said Sheba, drawing a long breath and looking round. "I love air and space and freedom. They're better than towns any day."

"Yet you're always longing to get away from here."

"Yes, to travel and see the world and all the beautiful things in it, and what 'civilization' is like; but I feel as if I could never *live* in a city, to be cramped up between walls and streets, not a sight of forest and sky, and rivers and mountains. Oh, it would be hateful!"

"Well, so far as I can see," said her brother, "we're likely to live and die here, and nowhere else, so there's no use in wishing. But how late father is. It will soon be dark. I wish he'd make haste, I want my tea."

The girl looked down the long hilly road, a rough and uneven one at its best, which led straight to the ferry some mile and a half off. No one was in sight yet. She turned to the long French

window behind her ; it was open, but the inside blind was down. She cautiously lifted a corner and looked in. "Mother," she said softly, "may we have tea? Hex is hungry, and it's half-past six now. There's no sign of father. I expect the steamer was late."

"Yes, go and have your tea," said a querulous voice from within the room. "I will come directly. My head is better now."

Sheba turned quickly ; as she did so there came a "click" from the closing gate, and she saw two figures enter. "It *is* father!" she cried delightedly, and rushed down the verandah towards the garden. But then she stopped abruptly. A stranger was with her father, a tall man with a bronzed face and snow-white hair, yet not an old man by any means, despite those white locks.

He smiled at the dark and puzzled girl-face, turned so wonderingly in his direction.

"One of your youngsters, eh, Ormatroyd?" he asked in pleasant cheery tones.

A troop of dogs came flying out at this moment to welcome their master, and their loud barks and bays rendered speech almost impossible. However, when Mr. Ormatroyd's voice had secured silence, Sheba learnt that the stranger was no other than the new tenant of the Crow's Nest, and had come over from Sydney that evening with her father, and discovered during the journey that they were old college friends. Mr. Ormatroyd had insisted upon bringing him in to be introduced to his wife, and soon they were all seated at the table partaking of what she termed "bush fare," an anomalous meal, consisting of tea, corned beef, hot potatoes and home-made cakes and bread.

Mrs. Ormatroyd presided over the tea-tray, and cut bread and jam for the children. Certainly Sheba did not resemble her mother in appearance, a fact which was being constantly brought before her in the light of a reproach. Mrs. Ormatroyd was a fair tall woman, with a beautiful figure, but her face, despite its regular features, was spoilt by an habitual expression of discontent and ill-temper. The expression, in fact, conveyed Mrs. Ormatroyd's normal state of mind. She was ill-tempered. Nothing satisfied her ; nothing pleased her. The trials and troubles she had met with in life were always worse than other people's troubles and trials. She received everything that crossed her own will or desires, with a spirit of resentment that only added to their burden. According to her own version of affairs, she had been specially singled out by Fate as an object for ill-luck, suffering, and hardships, and they were things to which she did not take kindly. Trouble embitters some natures ; it humbles into patience others. Mrs. Ormatroyd did not belong to the latter class.

Sheba was one of her "trials," and had grown accustomed to hear herself quoted as such. She had run wild ever since she could remember. Her education had been chiefly what she taught herself from books, varied occasionally by a Latin lesson from her father, or a little musical instruction from her mother. The girl had a peculiarly vivid imagination far in excess of her years, and it was the principal source of all her domestic failures, for at times it completely ran away with her, and led her into perfect quagmires of fanciful troubles, and weird adventures.

A chance word let fall would be sufficient to set her off, and her brain would develop the most fearful tragedies, with a rapidity that almost terrified herself.

If Hex absented himself unaccountably, or her father was late, she would evolve a series of pictures from these trivial incidents, each more startling and harrowing than the last, till she woke from her trance of grief shedding bitter tears over the corpse or the grave, that her vivid fancy had made actual realities for the time being.

To-night she was perfectly absorbed in the novelty of this stranger's visit and conversation—far too much absorbed to pay any attention to her meal. Eating was at all times a vexation to her. She hated formal meals, and detested the sight of flesh or fowl tortured into messes for the gratification of human appetites. She would have preferred living on fruit, and bread and water, to anything else, but in this, as in most other matters, her will came into conflict with her mother's, and the result was disastrous for Sheba.

Again and again to-night did sharp rebuke recall her attention to the untasted food by her side, and at last only the threat of being sent from the table induced her to eat a few mouthfuls of bread, and drink her cold tea.

Everything that Mr. Saxton said seemed to her so marvellous. The bare idea of meeting and associating with girls—real English girls who had seen London and the Queen—sent her into ecstasies, and thrilled her whole excitable and intense nature with a rapture of expectation. She was sick of boys, and there were so many boys here. Ted Sanderson alone had six brothers; Bobby Burton two; Felix Holt one. The schoolmaster, Mr. Crawley, was a widower with one son. The clergyman was childless, and the doctor, who had only lately settled in the place, and owned a curious rambling old wooden house, called Woollaby, was a grim old bachelor.

These made up all the society of West Shore within a reasonable distance, so Sheba had had things all her own way, and asso-

ciated only with boys from the time that she could spin a top, or climb a tree, or wield a bat at cricket.

Her ambition of late had been to have a girl friend, as Providence had denied her a sister. She had spent three years in praying for one, but at last concluded reluctantly that its advent was not desirable to the Higher Powers, and gave up her petitions. But a friend, a girl like herself, with hopes, desires, aspirations and sympathies, surely that was not an altogether impossible contingency. Poor Sheba! who had yet to discover how very very different she was to most girls, and how unlikely it was that she ever would find one with kindred tastes and feelings.

But at this present time she hung enraptured on Mr. Saxton's account of his girls. She heard their names, and thought them lovely. Bessie, the eldest, she decided was to be her friend—the special chosen of her heart. The others would take lower place, and do very well as ordinary playmates, but Bessie, who was beautiful and clever, and two years older than herself, she would be first and chief.

Then came Floy, Beatrice and Nora. They were all to arrive on Monday, and this was Saturday, so she would have to command her soul in patience until then. She gave a sigh of resignation, and gulped down her tea. Her mother was telling her to leave the table, and Hex, having torn himself reluctantly from the charms of melon jam, was just putting away his chair.

Sheba rose, then stood breathless, her eyes shining like stars, her hands clasped eagerly. Mr. Saxton was suggesting that his friend should walk over with him to his new domicile to see if the vans had arrived, and the man in charge had made any of the rooms habitable.

"Oh," almost sobbed the girl, in her breathless eagerness, "may I come too, father; do—do let me? Oh please do?"

Mr. Saxton looked with amusement at the eager face. "Come by all means, my dear," he said. "It is a bright moonlight night, but can you walk as far?"

"Oh yes," cried Sheba, "twice as far." She was trembling all over. Her father had not yet given permission, and Sheba had been brought up on the wholesome principle of being denied most things for which she pleaded or craved. Perhaps this simple request would be found to have some deleterious object or motive, and an inexorable "No" would crush her wild longings, and send her in sick agony of disappointment to weep her heart out in solitude.

However, the Fates were propitious for once. Her father gave permission; her mother, after objecting that she would be out far beyond her usual bed-time, at last gave a reluctant "Yes." and

Sheba flew off like a bird for her hat, the only outdoor dress she ever donned for one half the year, and in five minutes more was off, and dancing along with eager feet by side of her new acquaintance.

It was night now, but night clear as day. The full moon shone with dazzling splendour, lighting every turn of the rough road, every leaf and wild flower, with marvellous distinctness. The sky was of the deepest loveliest blue, and gemmed from end to end with brilliant stars. The sultry heat of the day was over, and every waft of air seemed charged with subtle magnetism. From the bush on either side came strange noises and rustlings, the stir of life from creatures unseen; the flutter of a bird's wing, the hoarse croak of a frog, the whirr of night moths, a deep low hum from a cloud of mosquitoes.

Mr. Saxton glanced at Sheba, dancing along by his side.

"What a wild strange place it is," he said. "And you—I suppose you are a regular little bush girl, eh?"

"I don't know," said Sheba wistfully. "I really often wonder what I *am* like. You see I've never had any one to compare myself with."

"Indeed," he said, somewhat amused. "Well, we shall soon remedy that. I'm glad you will have my little girls for neighbours. I think they will cheer you up. You're an old-fashioned little mortal, I think."

"Am I?" said Sheba humbly. "I didn't know. I'm very sorry. Is it wrong to be old-fashioned? Are no English girls like me?"

"I fancy not," said her companion laughing, and glancing at her somewhat peculiar attire, which consisted of an old faded cotton frock, not over clean, and far too short for her long and slender limbs, and a great flapping straw hat, brown in colour, and absolutely without recommendation in point of shape, or trimming.

"Who takes care of your little girls?" asked Sheba presently.

"Oh, they have an aunt, a sister of mine. She acts generally as governess and housekeeper," said Mr. Saxton. "You will like her. She has a way of getting on with girls."

Sheba gave a deep sigh. "Oh," she cried, "if only it was Monday! What time may I come, Mr. Saxton?"

He laughed. "Are you so impatient? Well, not in the day, I should say; it would be too hot. About this time, and I will bring you home. It is a mile, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said. "But I can come home by myself. I don't want any one to take care of me."

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Afraid?" she echoed. "Of what? There's nothing that can hurt one here!"



"Not kangaroos," he asked, "or dingoes, or any of those wild animals I have heard of?"

She laughed aloud, and turned back a little to her father, who was some paces behind, struggling with a refractory pipe. "Father," she cried, "Mr. Saxton thinks kangaroos and dingoes dangerous; fancy that!"

"He will learn better before he's lived a month at the Crow's Nest," said Mr. Ormatroyd, joining them. "My dear fellow, there's nothing dangerous in the bush except snakes."

Then he bade Sheba run on in front while he and his friend talked business, and the girl obeyed, nothing loth, and began to hold commune with herself in her own peculiar fashion. "It is really as if I were waking up at last," she said, gazing rapturously at the blue sky, where, set low, and brilliant as jewels, gleamed the Southern Cross. "Let me see; first, three sweethearts—not that *they* count for much—then my book, my lovely, delicious, longed-for book! Then the news, then Mr. Saxton's arrival, and now my going to the Crow's Nest by moonlight. The one, one thing I have longed to do for years! Really to-night I think I am quite, quite happy. Oh, I hope—I hope—it will only last!"

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### CHAPTER III.

#### AT THE CROW'S NEST.

THE Crow's Nest was a strange, weird, dreary-looking place. The house itself, built of stone, and with wooden roof and verandah, was a rambling one-storied building, set in a perfect wilderness of shrubs, trees and vegetation of all sorts. The garden had once been carefully cultivated, and still bore signs of past care in the masses of roses, fuchsia, hydrangea and oleanders that shed perfume and brilliance everywhere, despite years of neglect. Fruit trees grew in abundance; pears, peaches, oranges, apricots, nectarines, plums, and the small and delicious-flavoured loquat covered acres of ground, and made a magnificent though wild and neglected orchard.

The verandah was smothered in passion flower and vine, now in a stage of fruit bearing. There were the usual amount of French windows opening on to it, but at present long years of tenantless desolation imparted to the building a gloomy and neglected appearance. The usual wooden palings inclosed the grounds. A large gate hung loosely on broken hinges, and two

unwieldy-looking vans were drawn up on what should have been the lawn, and some men were bearing in furniture and household goods through the open door which led into a large dark hall, from whence opened rooms of various shapes and sizes. A Chinaman was standing in the verandah superintending the men's efforts and exchanging a fire of "chaff" with them.

As the visitors approached he turned and greeted them with a low bow.

"Good evening, masters and missee," he said. "John do very muchee, muchee. Come from Sydney this morning. Wash all floors. Makee all clean. Memble all big piecee orders."

"Is this your servant?" asked Sheba, delighted at the man's quaint appearance, and expression.

"Yes, my cook and general factotum. My sister will bring a woman with her from Sydney, but this chap was highly recommended, and I think he will suit. He is a first-rate cook and a splendid gardener. That's just what I want here. It's so difficult to get servants."

"Yes," interpolated John, "me berry good cookee; makee muc<sup>h</sup> nice dish out of nothing; makee berry good garden. Chinaman makee better gardener than Englishee man. Englishee man no good—no good!"

"Well," said Mr. Saxton, laughing good-humouredly, "we'll see what you can do, John, by-and-by. Now let's go into the house and have a look at the rooms. I bought the place in Sydney and haven't the least idea what it's like."

Sheba flitted in, disregarded.

The house had a dreary forlorn look. The rooms were badly whitewashed, the mantelpieces of rough wood, and the windows were dirty and ill-fitting. There were no grates, only hearths; but Sheba was used to that, and it did not seem to her to warrant Mr. Saxton's exclamations of horror. She amused herself by disposing of the rooms to the different occupants. This was to be Mr. Saxton's; this, of course, his sister's; and this small one, with its long windows wreathed by thumbergia, would of course be Bessie's. There would be matting on the floor, and snowy curtains, and a little white bed. She could see it all, and the face of its girl occupant. She stood there so long wrapped in a maze of fancies and speculations—"Sheba's dreams," her mother always called them—that she lost all count of time, and was startled at last at the sound of her father's voice calling her. He and Mr. Saxton were in the verandah.

"Come, child, we must be going," said her father. "It is nearly nine o'clock."

Sheba stood there a moment and looked round. The moon lit up all the wealth of fruit and leafage, the wild luxuriance of creepers and blossoms that scented the air with fragrance. Beyond lay vast depths of shadow, and through the still clear air came the rippling sound of a water-course.

"Isn't it beautiful!" cried the girl suddenly. "It is worth living, only to see such a night."

The two men looked at her; their faces were grave and anxious. They had been discussing matters of graver import than bush scenery.

"That child seems half a poet," said Mr. Saxton to his friend, looking at the young rapt face and deep and solemn eyes.

"She is very odd," said her father. "I can't think where she gets her fancies, and her passion for books. Her mother and I are prosaic folk enough."

Sheba was silent. But all the way home, and in her dreams that eventful night, she seemed to hear the echo of those words—"Half a poet."

Was it true? Could it be true? Had she solved at last the riddle of her strange nature—the secret of that inward craving, that terrible unrest, that made her thrill and tremble, and desire and doubt, where others simply lived and accepted; that made her long to drink deep full draughts of knowledge with lips of unquenchable thirst—that seemed to set aside such trivial things as feminine beauty and adornment, and almost deify the majesty and richness of mental gifts.

She lay there with the veil of the transparent curtains drawn around her bed, and gazed with solemn wondering eyes through the open window.

How still, how sacred was the night! Its rich scents swept up to her from the moonlit garden. Its mysteries spoke to her from the starry heavens. Her heart seemed to glow and exult. The young blood in her veins, thrilled by nature's magnetic force, stirred in passionate tumult and fired her brain with thoughts that were too wild, too weird, too vivid, for utterance of commonplace words.

She sat up in her bed, and the rich masses of dark hair—her one beauty—veiled her in dusky glory; her eyes glowed like lamps of fire, and her heart beat so fast it almost frightened her.

Then from her lips burst one imploring prayer—the outspring of this intense emotion, the very cry of her being to the divinity of its Creator:

"Oh, Spirit of Life, omnipotent and great! Give me neither wealth nor beauty, nor any earthly gift, but a heart to feel and

a mind to know, and the power to speak to others of all that Thou dost speak to me. Give me but this, and take all else of mine—heart, soul and spirit—to Thy service, and I will bless and love Thee, now and evermore.”

Strange prayer for childish lips ; for in years Sheba was but a child.

Strange prayer indeed of a poet-heart that future years might only crown with the thorns that are too sadly often the tribute of a woman's genius ! Strange, but yet not so strange, or so terrible, as the answer which the Future was to bring.

Contrasts are the salt of life ; but the contrasts in Sheba's life did not possess much savour for her, and certainly the difference between her rapt dreams and passionate prayers of Saturday night, and the calm flat prose of the ensuing Sunday morning, was great.

First, after her cold bath came the ordeal of clean, starched, uncomfortable clothes. Then, every Sunday morning her mother made it a rule to brush, oil and plait that dusky cloud of hair which on week days streamed about her shoulders at its own sweet will.

Even at her best Sheba was a plain child, but with her hair shining and smooth, and tightly drawn from her colourless irregular face, she looked positively ugly. However, Mrs. Ormatroyd had strong ideas on the subject of “method” and “rule,” and the girl, however inwardly rebellious at this torture, could but submit to it. A dark frown knitted her low brow, and anger and impatience flashed in her sombre eyes, but as their only result was a slap with the hair brush and the learning of a few extra verses of the regulation Sunday chapter, they did not seem of any great use, save indeed as a vent to her own ill-temper. For Sheba *was* ill-tempered—every one said so, even her sweet-hearts, who came and went like the seasons of the year—and she was usually more ill-tempered on Sunday than on any day of the week. She disliked going to church and sitting still and bolt upright in an uncomfortable pew, listening to a service every word of which she knew by heart, and a prosy, incomprehensible sermon, badly written and worse delivered, which it was one of her own and her brother's Sunday tasks to write out from memory, and read to their parents in the evening. What advantage was derived from this peculiar infliction, Sheba had never yet discovered. Her parents evidently supposed it was a capital plan for enforcing attention to the sermon, but Sheba found out that so long as she remembered the text and the concluding sentence

of the worthy old clergyman's discourse, her imagination and fertility of thought might supply all other matter without fear of detection. Working upon this ingenious method, the girl wrote her own ideas of the sermon instead of transcribing the discourse itself, and often made it a great deal more interesting and certainly more original, than that delivered by Mr. Payne.

On this special Sunday morning the heat was intense, and the very thought of sitting for two long hours in the little iron church was, to Sheba, hateful. But nothing except illness ever excused the smallest abatement of discipline or duty in the Ormatroyd household, and the infliction of her Sunday hat, a hideous wide, unbecoming structure of white straw and pink ribbons, was added as the very crown of her day's martyrdom.

Poor Sheba! Her tightly-plaited hair, her stiff muslin frock, her hideous and uncomfortable hat, and hateful gloves, all donned to do honour to the day and the service, by some mistaken and wrong-headed idea of the "fitness" of things. Probably in her loose comfortable cotton, with her hair in its customary state of freedom, her mind and temper both would have been more in unison with the thoughts and services of the Sabbath. As it was, she was in a state of rebellion that threatened to break forth in some awful breach of discipline before ever the day was over. She marched on between her father and Hex, each of them unfurling their white-covered umbrellas against the glaring sun. Mrs. Ormatroyd was not going to church that morning, being obliged to initiate the new domestic into the mysteries of cooking a sirloin of beef and a Yorkshire pudding—delightful viands for a sultry summer's day.

The sky was like a furnace; there was not a breath of air; Sheba panted as she lifted her colourless face to that glaring fer-vid blue. "How hot it will be in church," she said, glancing appealingly at her father.

"Not hotter than last Sunday," he said stolidly.

Sheba sighed resignedly and said no more. She resolved to think of her new friends all church time, to make up for the martyrdom of attending it.

The little tinkling bell had just ceased as they reached the door. A very sparse and scant congregation were simmering on the wooden benches. All the windows were open, but there was absolutely not a breath of air, and the heat from the zinc roof (yclept iron) was almost intolerable. The service began. To Sheba's surprise a strange clergyman stood by old Mr. Payne's side, and she commenced speculating as to whether he would preach, and hoping, for the sake of change, he would. She took off her hat

unobserved by her father, a thing she would never have dared to do had her mother been present.

How endless seemed the routine of the service; the standing and kneeling and sitting; how interminable the Litany, with its ever-recurring formula, "We beseech Thee to hear us." How abnormally long the many hymns, accompanied by a wheezy old organ and a choir composed of three men and one woman, and in which the congregation languidly joined at intervals, when they felt up to the exertion. But at last sermon time came, and Sheba's eager eyes noted that it was the stranger who ascended the pulpit steps, and, marvellous to relate, stood up without the customary bundle of manuscript. Simply opening a small Testament, he gave out his text.

Sheba clasped her hands round her knees, an attitude peculiar to herself when interested, and gazed with wide absorbed eyes at the face above her.

A strangely delicate face—very pale, very grave, very earnest, but full of interest and promise; deep-set grey eyes, luminous with thought and power; and a voice, deep, rich, pathetic—a voice to give the simplest words effect, and to enchain the most heedless listener. She had never heard a sermon like it; plain, simple, but earnest as deep thought and consciousness of truth could make it. A sermon that she drank in with eager ears, yet which opened out a vein of thought that the speaker little imagined.

She glanced round once. Hex and her father were sound asleep. A faint smile stole to the corners of her mouth, but she touched her brother's arm warningly. "You won't be able to write the sermon," she whispered. "Come, wake up."

The boy rubbed his eyes. "Oh, don't bother," he said; "I can copy yours."

"I think you generally do," said Sheba austerely. "Hush! it's over now. I'm almost—sorry."

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## CHAPTER IV.

### SHEBA'S IDEAS ON THEOLOGY.

HOTTER and hotter grew the day. Sheba thought longingly of her "wilderness," but she knew it would be vain to ask permission to retreat there on Sunday.

From her early childhood Sunday had always been a day of extreme regulation; the morning tasks, the eleven o'clock service,

the afternoon sermon, the evening readings and singing of hymns, and then—well, then, to Sheba, the one only delightful hour of the day, bedtime—when she could draw the mosquito-net round her and breathe with freedom and relief, and think of six days of more congenial occupation that would follow.

All this shows that she was by no means an exemplary specimen of a most exemplary method of "bringing up." There must have been a good deal of the "Old Adam," or rather "Eve," about Sheba. Certainly she never took kindly to discipline, or religion, or domestic instruction, though all had been administered to her with the very best intentions and on the most improved system. There was certainly no "sparing the rod," neither any "spoiling the child;" yet the result was not satisfactory. The fault, no doubt, lay with the girl herself, whose mind and nature were assuredly not of the "regulation" pattern, and therefore did not lend themselves kindly to received traditions of training.

She was somewhat of a riddle even to herself; she knew she wanted something out of life, but what that something was she could not explain. She sat now in the coolest corner of the verandah, her paper on a little wooden table, her pen idly tracing lines of all shapes and sizes on the blank sheet before her. The sermon had advanced no further than the text, although her brain was teeming with thoughts. Hex, who sat opposite, had already filled two pages, which it is only fair to say his sister had dictated, yet her own paper was blank. Her hand supported her cheek and kept back the thick hot mass of hair; her eyes, somewhat languid and heavy, turned ever and anon to the dazzling blue sky.

"I can't write in this heat," she exclaimed at last. "It is suffocating; oh, if only a storm would come!"

"And then you couldn't write in a storm," remarked Hex, "the lightning always frightens you."

"Not the lightning—the thunder. It is as if the whole sky crashed together. One almost wonders it doesn't fall to pieces with the shock. Did you ever think, Hex, that if it sounds so loud here, it must sound ever so much louder up there, in the sky itself. I wonder if the angels like it!"

This idea, presenting as it did the heavenly life in a totally new aspect, seemed to strike Hex as worthy of consideration. He laid down his pen, leant back in his chair and surveyed his sister critically.

"You *are* a rum girl," he said emphatically. "Whatever makes you think of the things you do?"

She shook her head. "How can I tell? They come, I don't want to think of them. They give me a great deal of trouble

sometimes, and at night I often can't sleep, there seem so many thoughts coming and going in my head."

"I think," said Hex with stolid gravity, "that it's a great mistake to be always wanting to know everything, and the meaning of everything, as you do. Look at Eve now, see what she's done for us."

"I'm not at all sure," said Sheba audaciously, "that God didn't intend her to disobey Him from the very first. Else what was the use of making such a big world when there'd have been no one to live in it, and even if she hadn't eaten the apple, no doubt one of her children would have done it some day, and it would have come to the same thing in the end. Do you know, Hex," she went on gravely, "there are some things in the Bible I really can't believe? It's no use saying we *must*, I'm sure I never can. Now just read that part about King Pharaoh and the Israelites. God distinctly tells Moses that He will harden Pharaoh's heart so that he *shall not* let the children of Israel go out of Egypt. Well, if God was so powerful and so clever, what chance had poor Pharaoh against Him? His heart was *made* hard by God, and then God punishes him with all sorts of cruel plagues. I call it most unjust."

"Perhaps," said Hex, "that part is not translated right. It may be something different in Hebrew."

"Then," said Sheba eagerly, "the very first time I see Mr. Payne I'll ask him what the exact meaning is—in Hebrew."

"I should," said Hex with a grin of delight, "for I don't believe he knows a word of it."

"Clergymen," said his sister rebukingly, "know everything about the Bible. What are they for, except to study it and explain it to any one who wishes to know?"

"I'm sure," said Hex with a yawn, "I'd never want to know more than I was obliged. It's awful dry stuff, especially the Old Testament, and it makes out that God was as fond of fighting as Julius Cæsar, or—or Napoleon."

"I often wonder," said Sheba thoughtfully, "how there came to be *evil* in the world. Could God have made *that*? They say He made everything; and there was the serpent, you know? I should say to create wickedness you must know what it is yourself, yet God is supposed to be all goodness, isn't He?"

"Oh," said Hex, who hated his sister's theological speculations, "what's the good of bothering? There's God, and there's the devil; we don't need to know more."

"I think we do," said Sheba; "at least I do. The Bible doesn't explain half about the *real* beginning of the world. If



God knew everything, He must have known Eve would sin, and what was the use of making her only to destroy her, and the human race after her?"

"Perhaps," suggested Hex with a sudden burst of wisdom, "He only set everything going just to see what would happen, and then—left it."

"There's Cain and Abel again," went on his sister speculatively. "What harm did Cain do that his sacrifice should be rejected? To my thinking it was better to offer the fruits of the earth than to kill poor little harmless lambs and their mothers. Yet God accepts the slaughtered life, and rejects the simple offering. It was not just, and I shall never think so, and it was the injustice that produced the crime."

"Oh, my dear girl, do give up diving into subjects and speculating about them," exclaimed Hex. "Depend on it, no one is *meant* to understand the Bible. I never could, and I don't mean to try. It's all very well for clergymen, and even they don't seem quite up to it. At least Mr. Payne isn't, that's certain. That's the best of Roman Catholics, now. They've no bother; their religion is all done for them. The priests prefer that they shouldn't read the Bible, but just believe as much as *they* tell them, and if they do any wrong they need only confess and get absolution. Well, I've done my sermon. See how much quicker I am than you."

"I suppose it is full of 'And he said's,'" remarked his sister; "varied by an occasional 'Then he observed.'"

Hex laughed. "Oh," he said, "they do to fill up. What are you looking for in the Bible?"

"An idea has just occurred to me," said the girl eagerly. "Of course we know that Genesis wasn't written at the time the events it describes really happened; not for hundreds of years after, perhaps. In that case I see some reason for that story of Cain's sacrifice."

"Oh, haven't you done with Cain yet? Well, let's hear it."

"The scribes were the priests after Moses' time," continued Sheba, "and they seem to have had a perfect craze for sacrifices and burnt offerings. Have you noticed that?"

"Yes," said Hex, slowly kicking his feet to and fro. "I thought probably they found those meat offerings useful for dinner."

"That's it, exactly," said Sheba triumphantly. "Perhaps in writing up the records they thought it would impress the people more if they found that blood sacrifices were more acceptable to God, and therefore twisted the story round to fit that idea. There was no one to contradict them. It seems impossible that all that early history can be accurate, when you remember it

had to be handed down by word of mouth. I asked Mr. Payne about it the last time he was here, and he said that doubtless the records were more true in the spirit than in the letter. But he doesn't seem to like to talk to me about the Bible."

"I daresay not," grinned Hex. "You give him some posers to answer now and then."

He rose and stretched himself. "Are you going to begin at last?" he asked.

Sheba pushed back the thick hair from her brow, and drew the paper towards her. Then she began to write, her brother lazily watching her as she rapidly covered the sheets.

"How can you remember all that?" he said at last.

Sheba looked up. "Remember?" she said dreamily; "I don't know. I just put down the text, then all the rest comes; one idea rushes after another, until it seems quite hard to stop."

"Are you going to do more than that?" asked Hex.

"Oh yes; lots. I feel just in the humour now."

"Well, I am going to find Billy, and have a walk in the garden," said her brother, pushing back his chair. "You'll find me there when you've done."

Sheba nodded and went on with her work, dashing off sentences and paragraphs at railway speed. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes sparkled. She looked a different being to the sallow languid girl who, but a short time before, had been tracing idle lines on the now covered paper.

Once her task was finished she did not read it over, but simply placed the sheets together, and then with a deep-drawn breath of relief snatched her shabby old garden hat from its peg, and ran off to join her brother.

"Oh, if only it were not Sunday I might read my 'Arabian Nights,'" she sighed regretfully as she joined Hex and the goat and the tribe of dogs, who all seemed more or less oppressed by the heat, and were lying under the shade of the huge pear tree, which was the giant of the garden. "I'm so sick of 'Hannah More,' and 'The Pilgrim's Progress,' our only two Sunday books. I wish father would get some new ones from Sydney."

"Perhaps these new girls will have some," suggested Hex.

"You'd better ask them."

"Of course I shall," said Sheba. "But it seems such a awfully long time till Monday, and Mr. Saxton said I must not go there till the evening. I wonder," she went on dreamily as she hugged her knees in her own peculiar ungraceful fashion, "oh, Hex, I do so wonder, what they will be like, especially Bessie. I've made up my mind she is to be my very own special friend."

"Have you?" said Hex. "Don't you think it would have been better to have waited, and seen if she liked you first?"

"Liked me!" Sheba's face flushed, her eyes dilated. "Why shouldn't she like me?" she demanded fiercely. "I know I'm ugly, but that doesn't matter to a girl, and not very good-tempered, but I would try and be gentle and forbearing always with her." Then her voice broke, and a passion of tears quenched the blaze of wrath in her eyes. "Oh!" she cried tempestuously, "no one seems to care for me, no one understands me, not even you, Hex, though you are my brother. It seems to me as if some one, out of spite, had just picked me up and dropped me into a wrong place; I don't fit, and I'm always being scolded and punished, and I long, long, *long* to be loved; and mother seems to have quite a horror of me, and you don't care, and father seems half afraid to show any affection, and there I am. It would have been a great deal better if I'd never been born, I'm sure it would, or else if God had put me into some other family."

"What on earth are you talking about, Sheba?" demanded a voice behind her.

The girl started to her feet, the tears were still in her eyes, her cheeks burned with that crimson flush.

As she looked back at her mother's face, however, her own changed and grew colourless and subdued, and almost timid.

"Nice conversation for a Sunday afternoon," continued that severe rebuking voice. "I have heard what you said to your brother. Go into your room and remain there till tea-time as a punishment for your indelicate and almost blasphemous remarks. You shall not go and see those new girls at the Crow's Nest, tomorrow. You are not fit to be the companion of ladylike well-brought-up English children. I shall tell their father so."

Sheba's face grew white as death. She was accustomed to punishments and deprivations that were inordinately severe in comparison with her misdemeanours, and as a rule she took them with stoical indifference, but the injustice of this present sentence cut her to the heart. Without a word she turned away, but the very soul within her seemed to burn with black and bitter rage, and indignant passion.

"Oh," she cried, when solitude allowed some safe vent for her outraged feelings, "oh, that I were grown up and able to do what I liked. Wouldn't I be revenged!"

Then she threw herself face downwards on the floor and cried herself sick and exhausted; and finally obeyed the summons to tea, a poor forlorn wreck of what should have been childhood;

white, red-eyed and ugly, perfectly unable to touch food, which was put down to "bad temper," and to remedy which the learning of two extra verses of the Sunday evening hymn was prescribed.

"It is no use to kick against the pricks," said Sheba, in the depths of her rebellious heart. "But oh, how I loathe Sunday! Thank goodness, it's nearly over."

There still remained the ordeal of reading out her sermon, and as the time drew near for family prayers, Sheba began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. Memory gave her faint recurring stings; she had a distinct remembrance of some wild flight of fancy to which she had weakly yielded, and though she knew nothing about "orthodoxy" she felt convinced her account of the new clergyman's sermon was not strictly correct. She tried to take heart of grace, to re-assure her courage by telling herself that her father had slept throughout the sermon, and her mother had been absent. They would be none the wiser, and she had done the same thing over and over again. Yet to-night, despite these assurances, she could not feel quite safe or quite comfortable as the dreaded hour approached. It had been one of her bad "Sundays," and everything had turned out wrongly; perhaps the sermon might be only another species of Nemesis, and behind it a whole category of punishments might be lying in wait.

Prayers were over. The ordeal must be faced. The two children rose from their knees, and, according to custom, went out to fetch their sermons. Sheba walked very, very slowly along the wide verandah to the little table where lay her MS., badly written, blotted and untidy as usual. How could she attend to the details of penmanship, when the Pegasus of imagination was carrying her off on one of those strange flights of fancy to which as yet she could give no name?

As she turned back with the papers in her hand, she heard the click of the great wooden gate falling to on its latch. She started and looked back. She saw two figures advancing—the bright moonlight showed their faces clear and distinct. Poor Sheba fairly gasped with horror.

One of the gentlemen advancing towards the verandah was Mr. Payne, the other was the strange clergyman whose sermon she was just about to read out, as a feat of her accurate memory and an indisputable proof of her attention in church.

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## CHAPTER V.

## CAUSE AND EFFECT.

WITHOUT waiting to greet the visitors. Sheba rushed into the parlour, where Hex was already standing, sermon in hand.

"Oh, mamma," she cried excitedly, "here is Mr. Payne coming and the strange clergyman with him. We needn't read our sermons out before them, need we?"

"I do wish, Sheba, you wouldn't burst in on people in that impetuous way," exclaimed her mother crossly. "Sit down there by the piano, and you too, Hex."

The children obeyed. Hex laid his sermon down on the table, but Sheba grasped hers instinctively, and held it on her lap, while the blood came and went in her face, and her heart throbbed wildly with shame and apprehension. She would be caught this time—there was no help for it. She thought of the "faith that could remove mountains," and wondered if by setting her whole soul and will on the averting of this catastrophe a miracle might result! As the steps approached, however, and the two gentlemen advanced into the full glow of the lamplight, her courage began to ooze away and with it the necessary amount of faith. She gave a little gasp of resignation and then remained quite still in her corner, an image of stony despair, only trusting her presence might be overlooked by some happy chance. A few moments passed, then Mr. Payne, who was a genial kind-hearted old man, glanced round and saw the two children, whom he knew very well. He immediately went up to them.

"Why, here is my clever little friend," he said encouragingly. "How do you do, Miss Sheba? Have you been writing my sermons as nicely as ever?"

Sheba stammered out something, she could not tell what, and the old clergyman, wondering at her unusual confusion—for Sheba was, as a rule, most self-possessed—took her hand and insisted on leading her up to his nephew, and introduced him to her as Mr. Noel Hill.

"This is a very clever little girl, Noel," he said, "and a very good little girl too. She is one of the most regular of my congregation, and she attends so well to all she hears in church that she writes the sermons from memory."

"Yes," interpolated Mrs. Ormatroyd, "that was my idea. I found it an excellent plan for insuring attention, and also impressing the valuable truths they hear upon my children's memories."

The new clergyman looked somewhat compassionate as his kind grave eyes rested on Sheba's downcast face.

"And have you written the sermon to-day?" he asked gently.

The poor child grew white to her very lips. Her eyes glanced up at him almost in terror.

"Oh, please don't ask me," she gasped. "It's nothing like—I mean it's not anything so good as what you said—and—and——"

"Sheba," said her mother sternly, "be silent!" Then turning to Mr. Payne, she added: "The children were just about to read their sermons out when you came, but, for this evening, I will excuse them."

Sheba clasped her hands in sudden rapture, the papers fell at her feet. Quick as thought the young clergyman picked them up, and just as she was uttering an ejaculatory thanksgiving for her safety, his low deep tones broke the silence.

"If you will pardon me," he said, "I must express a great curiosity to hear these sermons; I have never heard of such a plan before and I am sure the results must be excellent. As the sermons are here, do not let our presence interfere with the usual course of Sunday duties."

The colour flushed to Sheba's face, her eyes blazed with wrath and indignation.

"Couldn't you let well alone?" she muttered, so low that he only just caught the words, and regarded her with even more curiosity than before. At the request Mrs. Ormatroyd looked pleased. Her system of religious education was of course perfect; still, it gratified her to have an independent opinion expressed of its efficacy.

"If you and Mr. Payne would really like to hear the children," she said, "they shall of course read out their sermons. Hex, you begin."

Hex grew extremely red in the face, but making a virtue of necessity, plunged into the text, and rattled on with scant regard for punctuation, till he pulled himself up short at the end of the last page.

"Very good, my boy, very good indeed," said Mr. Payne affably, "you must have paid great attention."

Hex glanced at Sheba, a lurking grin about his wide mouth, but she was too perturbed to notice him. She had to face her own ordeal now, and as she stood there in the light of the lamp, her dark brows drawn, a burning spot on either cheek, her lips pressed close in sullen wrath, Noel Hill thought she made a strange picture of repressed rebellion, and watched her with keen interest.

She held the paper in both hands and stood for a moment

looking down at it. Then summoning all her courage, and with a ring of defiance in her clear young voice, she began. For the first page all was well; at the second the young clergyman suddenly lifted his head and looked at her in wonder; at the third he smiled, at the fourth he grew grave. Had he indeed said such words as that clear childish voice gave forth so unfalteringly?

"For it is not always well," she read now, "to search into the realms of knowledge, to seek the real truth of Heaven's glories, or strive to pierce its veil of mysteries. Many of them may be fables, most are handed down as traditions, and may be accepted as such. To a thinking, searching, thirsting soul it brings little comfort to picture a future spent in adoring incomprehensibility. Yet such is the vague and usually accepted idea of the Christian's Heaven. Quite as erroneous to reason, one would imagine, as that reverse side of the picture which paints hell all flames, and peopled by hungry devils! An all-seeing and all-wise mind might well be supposed capable of inventing a more rational system of reward or punishment. But half the world is content to accept without question, and the other half to scoff without proof. Between the two, if an eager inquiring soul puts out feelers of curiosity, it touches nought that is sure, and little that is true. Yet every human soul needs a God. Something to appeal to, cry to, worship, reverence and trust. But God is far, far off, and the vast misery of the earth does not seem to trouble Him. One wonders how He can bear to gaze on so much woe, the results of a creation that ought to have been perfect, the outcome of what was planned and formed in His own image. Small wonder then if the philosopher, and the thinker, and the poet looking out from some higher standpoint of thought than is reached by common humanity, should cry aloud with torn and anguished heart, 'Take back, O Great One, Thy gift of life, since life is only suffering, with death for recompense. Better the darkness and the void that first wrapped this strange globe in gloom, than the teeming burden of misery that never ends, sins that are never pardoned, of hearts that are never at peace! What is there in the present? only pain. What in the beyond only dreams; dreams that take the shape of men's thoughts and desires, yet even with their halo of divinity fail to satisfy the souls that ask for—certainty.'

The tones of her voice grew lower and more pathetic. The she ceased. There was a moment's pause of blank astonishment. Mr. and Mrs. Ormatroyd looked at one another as questioning the wisdom of discussing these extraordinary statements.

Mr. Payne murmured, "Dear me! very clever, very clever. How well you read, my little girl."

But Noel Hill looked grave and almost pained. "Thank you, my dear," he said gently, as he laid his hand on Sheba's head. "I see you do go to church for some purpose." Sheba flushed and trembled at his touch. Would he betray her? She glanced up, and the passionate appeal in those great wonderful eyes touched him deeply. "Do not fear," he said very low, and then he moved away, and Sheba snatching up her MSS. hurried from the room without staying to wish any one good-night.

"What rum stuff you did read out," said Hex, as he lighted his candle by his sister's a few moments afterwards. "Did Mr. Hill really say all that? Why it didn't sound *Christian*, some bits of it."

"I don't know what he said," answered Sheba, half-laughing, half-crying, as she went into her room. "But he's a real good man, and he's saved me an awful punishment."

Sheba would have been still more surprised had she known that he had saved her from the task of future sermon-writing, for at the end of a long and grave conversation with Mrs. Ormatroyd, he told her that the girl had too excitable a brain for her years, and that religious subjects had evidently taken too deep a hold on her nature.

"She must think very seriously, far too seriously, to be able to write such ideas as those I heard to-night," he said.

"But," exclaimed Mrs. Ormatroyd, "they were your own, were they not? She had merely committed them to memory."

Noel Hill felt as if he had put his foot in it. "To tell you the truth, my dear madam," he said, while his lips twitched despite their seeming gravity, "my sermon was extempore and I have not a very accurate idea of what I did say; your daughter seems to me to have done better than myself, and dealt even more daringly with my subject than I ventured to do. She must be very clever."

"Oh," said Mrs. Ormatroyd disparagingly, "she is well enough. But she is an extremely difficult child to manage. Her temper is something unbearable."

"These gifted children," said Noel Hill, "are often very troublesome and don't lend themselves kindly to discipline; you must let me have a talk to her now and then."

"With the greatest pleasure," exclaimed Mrs. Ormatroyd. "I should be only too delighted. I am so anxious to bring my children up on a really good sound Christian basis."

"Well," said the young man good humouredly, "we will see



what can be done with this talented young lady; only my first prescription will be, 'Knock off all sermon-writing,'"

## CHAPTER VI.

### A NEW FRIEND.

"Do you know, Miss Sheba," said Noel Hill, as he sat by the girl's side the next afternoon, in the wide cool verandah—"do you know that you are a very extraordinary little girl?"

"Am I?" said she, looking straight at him with her great sombre eyes. "Have you known many other little girls?"

"Not so many," said the young man thoughtfully; "and none of them—Australian. I have only just come out. My health was not good, and so, as soon as I was ordained, I left England to join my uncle here. I am to help him and the climate is to benefit me. You see the mutual advantage?"

"I hope it *will* benefit you," said Sheba gravely. "Now that I come to look at you, you don't appear very strong. What is the matter? Consumption?"

He flushed slightly. "Not quite so bad as that yet, but my lungs are not very strong. What made you ask?"

"Because I have heard my mother say so many consumptive people are sent here. It doesn't seem to do them much good, though—they mostly die."

"That," he said with a faint smile, "is encouraging for me."

"Oh," said the girl seriously, "I never thought you would be afraid to die. You are a clergyman—and of course you are very, very good and would naturally be prepared. I think sometimes that clergymen are just the very people to be consumptive."

"Indeed?" said her companion, more and more amused. "And why do you think so?"

"In the first place," said Sheba gravely, "it is an interesting death, and then they have plenty of time to prepare for it. I should think that was a comfort."

"No doubt," he said, "it is, and a great one. But perhaps you make a mistake. Clergymen are not always very, very good, and death may be no easier to them than to any one else. But what a gloomy subject for a little girl to discuss," he added brightly. "What makes you think of death at all?"

"What makes one think of anything?" cried Sheba, with a ring of repressed passion in her low, soft voice, "and of

things most of all. I don't want to think of them, but I can't help it. I wish I could. It makes me very unhappy."

"Unhappy?" echoed Noel Hill, looking wonderingly at her.

"Oh! dreadfully unhappy," she said, the tears brimming in her great upraised eyes. "I can't express what it is I feel and want—if I try to, every one says I'm old-fashioned, or wicked, or ridiculous."

"Perhaps," said the young clergyman gently, "you could tell me and I might help you."

"I am ashamed to tell you—after—after yesterday," she faltered. "What must you have thought of me? But, indeed, I hardly know what I write—it is just like being 'possessed.' I think I am driven on to do it. I can't help it, and I *was* thinking of what you said, only—only it got all different."

"I can only hope," he said, half smiling at her distressed face, "that it did, or else my first sermon was singularly unorthodox."

"Your first?" cried Sheba eagerly. "Was that really your first sermon?"

"Yes, I have taken part of a service, but never preached before. Perhaps that will explain why I was so anxious to judge of my first effort."

The girl's face grew very white. "I am so sorry," she said brokenly. "Indeed, indeed, I am so sorry."

"Oh! I am not going to scold you," he said gently. "I only thought I would like to ask you if you think it is quite—quite honest—to yourself as well as to others, to misrepresent their words. For I scarcely suppose this was your first attempt at improving clerical composition. No doubt my uncle has also suffered at your hands."

"Yes," she said flushing hotly, as she met that kind, smiling gaze. "But that was at least excusable. No effort of memory could represent his sermons."

"Well," said Noel Hill, "let us change the subject of sermons to that of yourself. Do you know that you are to become a pupil of mine?"

"What," cried Sheba, starting out of her chair, and facing him with such wonder and excitement expressed in eyes and face that he laughed aloud. "You are going to teach me? Oh! it seems too good to believe! And may I learn the things that men learn—Latin and Greek and Mathematics and History and Political Economy?"

"What? All that?" asked the young clergyman, as she paused almost breathless. "I shall have no easy task, I see; but I am quite at your service. You shall learn each and all of these things,

if you desire it, but not all at once. Knowledge, like other good things, should be taken gradually and moderately. A surfeit of learning means an attack of mental indigestion. Now I propose to begin to-morrow with nothing but an hour's reading, and finding out what you really have learnt : a miscellaneous collection of useful and useless subjects, I make no doubt. That little brain of yours is somewhat unevenly balanced at present. I almost think it would be the better of a little less knowledge, and a good deal more happiness."

"I thought," she said gravely, "that knowledge always brought—that."

"Not always," said Noel Hill gravely. "Many a man and woman have lived to regret that craving, 'to know.' It is sweet enough for awhile ; but there is a subtle danger in its very sweetness: The mind is led on and on, seeing the broad, full light beyond, yet groping in darkness towards it, and the light is never reached, for between it and the seeker lies the mystery of Death."

Sheba looked at him awed and silent. She was apt to rush at ideas with a passionate impulse, and the idea of learning from a man, and a clever man, such things as men themselves learn, had flooded her enthusiastic brain with ecstasy. But this gravity of Noel Hill's face awed and sobered her. "I thought," she said seriously, "that it was impossible to know too much. I cannot understand it making one unhappy."

And indeed she could not, for her whole heart and soul at this time were full of the craving for knowledge. Books were like human friends to her, and the difficulty of obtaining them made them all the more precious. Those thirteen years of her life had not been at all like most children's years. She had memories of poverty, struggles, hardships, though of late she had been used to hear her father boast he had "weathered the storm," and the harbour he had gained now was a pleasant enough one to her ideas. Her unusual precocity, the result, partly of her life, partly of a deep-thinking nature teeming with romance and imagination, made her also enjoy and suffer far more keenly than any other who knew her could have believed.

The craving for love and sympathy that was so deeply rooted in her heart, had met with an unfortunate check early in life owing to complete want of comprehension on her mother's part.

Sheba, to her own recollection, seemed always to have been held back, chilled, misunderstood. She could not remember any time in her young life when she had felt she could creep into her mother's arms, to weep out some childish sorrow, or lean against her mother's knee, to speak out some childish confidence ; and

the child who has never felt such an impulse there must remain a void and bitterness of heart, for which nothing in after life can atone.

Dreams cannot supply the place of human love, and Sheba's descents to real life were invariably attended by a sense of desolation and defeat. The many tendrils of affection she from time to time put forth were beaten down by a hail of ridicule and impatience. So the girl gradually began to live more and more within herself. Books and dreams were at present the chosen companions of her days. That the former dominated her affections, it is almost needless to say. They fed and fostered each other and threw a halo of enchantment over the sameness of life.

The advent of Noel Hill—the first startling announcement that he was to undertake the arranging of that strange medley of knowledge, ignorance and inutility which formed her only ideas of "education," was a very startling one indeed, more startling even than that he should have called this afternoon, expressly to see her and make her acquaintance.

She liked him instinctively. She had liked him from the moment he mounted the pulpit in the little iron church and turned his pale face and deep-set eyes upon his sparse and drowsy congregation. There was nothing at all remarkable about him; he was not handsome, or tall, or strong, but to Sheba's ideas he was something ten thousand times better than any of these. He was clever. He had a mind cultivated and trained, and full of rich and varied stores of knowledge, and she sat there by his side, silent and absorbed, wrapped only in the dreamy enjoyment of anticipation. At last she could cut the cords that bound her to earth and soar into a region far beyond Mangnall's Questions, and Pinnock's History, and the first book of the Latin Grammar which she had studied with and under Hex's valuable assistance. A teacher of her own—an instructor, wise, clever and forbearing; for surely Noel Hill was all these things and more—being a clergyman! Providence had indeed taken pity on her at last, and sent her the very gift she had prayed for so often. The few books she had devoured over and over again had never seemed to have enough in them to satisfy her. They wanted strength, flavour, depth. Her own fancy had always to eke them out; her own rich stores of imagination to embellish them. But now all would be changed; no little paltry tasks, no set boundary of "thus far and no further." She would make her new teacher let her learn all she wished. She would know the thoughts of great and wise men, whose names were as pillars of flame in all the world. She would steep herself in such knowledge as had made them glad to

live. She would forget that no one loved her—that she was ugly and ill-tempered. She would cultivate every mental gift which nature had dowered her, and then some day, perhaps, she would be a wise and clever woman and——

Here her thoughts broke off abruptly. Noel Hill had risen to his feet and was speaking. His voice seemed to reach her from some far-off region. It required quite an effort to bring herself down to the affairs of the present moment.

"Come, child," he was saying, "you have been thinking long enough. I want you to take me into the garden and show me your pets. I heard all about them last night from my uncle, especially the goat. He says you found it dying when it was quite a tiny kid and saved its life, and now it follows you everywhere like a dog. It's almost a case of 'Mary had a little lamb, isn't it?'"

Sheba looked somewhat indignant. "I wonder, Mr. Hill," she said, "that you quote those foolish nursery rhymes, only fit for babies."

"Oh!" said Noel Hill laughingly. "I like frivolous and childish things, I assure you. They keep one young, and youth is God's best gift."

"Is it?" said Sheba doubtfully. "I should have thought wisdom was!"

"Ah!" said Noel Hill, glancing at her with amused and critical eyes, "it is not for nothing that you were called 'Sheba.' Perhaps some day we shall have you traversing the earth to gaze upon some epitome of human wisdom, and worship at his shrine. I wonder who will play King Solomon to you!"

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## CHAPTER VII.

### SHEBA'S GARDEN.

THE garden was large and shady and as different as it well could be from an English garden. To reach it, Sheba and her companion had to cross a large yard and pass a wash-house where wood was kept, and where the fowls had a perverse fancy both for roosting and laying eggs. From this wash-house came a faint bleat, and at Sheba's call, out trotted Billy from his lair of loose hay. He rubbed his head against the girl's dress and then proceeded to playfully at Noel Hill's legs, a proceeding which rather disconcerted that gentleman.

"Oh! he always does that to strangers," said Sheba composedly.

"He doesn't know you yet."

"I hope," said Noel Hill, drawing back a little as the animal proceeded to stand bolt upright on his hind legs, preparatory to another onslaught, "that he soon will. His overtures are not as agreeable as they might be."

"Come, Billy, no nonsense," said the girl as she took the pretty creature by its brown silky ear and forced it into a less pugnacious attitude. "You mustn't butt this gentleman. Would you mind giving me your hand?" she added to Noel. "If he sees me hold your hand he will know you are a friend. I am obliged to do that with my sweethearts, or he would knock them down like so many ninepins."

Noel gave her his hand with alacrity. He had plenty of courage, but he certainly did not feel comfortable in the presence of an animal who had a perverse objection to stand in the way nature intended all four-footed creatures to stand, and whose small sharp horns were decidedly more ornamental to look at, than agreeable to feel. However, Sheba was right. When Billy saw his young mistress take the stranger's hand and walk along beside him he appeared inclined to reserve hostilities, and trotted placidly along in front of them, or else kept close to Sheba, but made no more attacks on the young clergyman.

"It is a very pretty creature," he said. "But what was that you said about 'sweethearts?' Where have you found any in these regions?"

"There is a school here—a boys' school," said Sheba, "and Hex goes to it. Now it may appear strange, but he is the only boy who has a big sister. There are one or two babies, I believe. Consequently all the boys want me for a sweetheart. It's their way, and I don't mind. I get books from them. If you only knew how difficult it is to get books you wouldn't wonder at my even putting up with a sweetheart, though they bother me dreadfully."

"Am I to conclude that it is an Australian fashion to take to sweethearts at your tender years?" asked Noel Hill, laughing.

"I suppose it is," said Sheba doubtfully. "At least it is the boys' fashion. They have done it ever since we came to live that was just three years ago. Before then we were really the bush—at Tanilba—ever so many miles away. It was dreadfully lonely and mother was always ill, and we never could get any servants—only an old black woman, and she used to steal readfully, and was so dirty. Father and I had to cook, and he had to kill the sheep too. It was nearly always mutton. Oh,

how I hated it. The very smell turns me sick even now. If I had my way, I would eat nothing but fruit and vegetables. When I am grown up and can do what I like, I shall never touch meat."

"What a large garden this is," said Noel Hill, glancing round admiringly. "And an arbour, too. Is that a retreat of yours?"

"Oh, no!" said Sheba. "I like the trees best. I always climb up them and sit as high as I can when I want to be quiet and read. That's my favourite tree. Isn't it a beauty? About half-way up it's like a little room. Such a nice seat and all shut round with boughs and leaves, and a roof open to the sky. No one can see me when I'm there. I prefer it even to the wilderness, for the boys have never found it out."

"And where," asked Noel Hill, "is the wilderness?"

"It is some way from here," she said. "You see those palings. Well, through them and beyond is a great place, all scrub and gum trees. I don't think it belongs to this house, but Hex and I go there just as if it did. I don't quite like it this hot weather; there are so many lizards about, and once I saw a snake. There are heaps of birds, too, and grasshoppers and locusts and all sorts of funny insects."

"Including mosquitoes, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, but they only come at sunset. What are you looking at? The well? It's awfully deep, and lots of lovely little green frogs live down here. Hex and I fish for them sometimes in the bucket."

"Isn't that a somewhat dangerous amusement?" asked Noel Hill. "You might fall in."

They were close beside it, and as he bent over to look he almost shuddered at the depth. It was utterly unprotected save for a wooden lid which lay some distance off, and the water was drawn up in a bucket worked by a windlass and rope.

"Oh!" said Sheba, "I am used to it. I often draw the water."

"Do you mean to say," said Noel Hill in surprise, "that the water you require for household purposes has to be carried from here to the house?"

"Of course," she said. "Why not? Haven't they wells in England?"

"No—o, at least not where I lived. The water is carried to the houses in pipes, and you simply turn a tap and get it without any trouble."

"Oh!" said Sheba thoughtfully, "that must be very comfortable; but I suppose the houses are quite different to ours. No verandahs or outside shutters?"

"No. You see, they don't require them in England. There is very little hot weather there."

"Any thunderstorms?" inquired Sheba.

"Oh, yes, but not often and not so severe as these tropical storms. I shall never forget the first storm I saw here. It was terrible."

"I like them," said the girl, "although they frighten me a little. Sometimes I stand in the verandah and watch. I remember," she went on dreamily, "when I was a little child that I always used to think a thunderstorm meant that God was angry with people, and was speaking to them from out of heaven."

"You have odd fancies for your age," said Noel Hill, regarding her earnestly. "I wish you would tell me what gave you such strange ideas of heaven and religion as that sermon of yours betrayed."

"Oh, that sermon," she said, the colour rising like a flame in the dark pallor of her cheeks. "I wish you would not speak of it. I told you before I don't know what made me write it. It was just one of those things that pop into my head. Sometimes, when I lie in the wood there all alone, or sit up in my tree and see only the sky and the green leaves, and forget that I have to come down and live and eat and work, I think of things about God and the world and the sin that is in it, and what a pity it all seems, and how much better it would be not to be born at all."

She broke off for a moment, then turned to him again in a quick, impulsive fashion. "I dare say you will think me very foolish," she said, "but if you knew how often I have cried myself ill thinking of all the sorrows and strangeness of life and how people suffer and how little good it all is. . . . You were talking of thunderstorms just now. Well, once when we lived at Tanilba there was a terrible one. The thunder crashed as if all the sky was bursting, and the lightning—it nearly blinded me to look at it. Every one was frightened. Hex had his head buried under the bedclothes, and mother was in her room, but I couldn't rest and I went into the verandah. There was a little wooden hut in the yard where the 'gin' (our black servant) used to be, and I was looking at it and wondering if she was frightened, when there came a crash so awful that I thought the Judgment Day had come. I shut my eyes, and when I opened them I saw a huge gum tree had been struck, just beyond the clearing; then a minute after I heard a scream and the 'gin' rushed out crying and wringing her hands. She had been sitting by the fire with her baby, and just put it down for a moment in its wooden cradle to go and shut the door of the hut. The lightning came down



the chimney and struck the child, played round the hut, and then broke a pane of glass and got out. When she rushed over to the child, it was dead. I shall never forget her grief and the awful look of the poor little baby. I had never seen any dead person before. I thought it seemed so hard. Her husband was a bad and cruel man and had left her. The child was all she had. Why should it have been taken away? If the husband had been killed, it would only have been just. But the poor little innocent child, her only comfort."

Tears rushed to her eyes, her voice faltered. She turned away as if ashamed of her emotion.

Noel Hill laid his hand gently on her arm. "My dear little girl," he said, "these are mysteries that have perplexed older and wiser minds than yours. You must remember God's way is not as man's way. His purposes seem often dark and inscrutable, but in the end we see their wisdom. It is no use to rebel or question. We cannot avert and we cannot alter one decree. We can but hope that a day will come when with clearer eyes and understanding hearts we shall see how wise and good was the end for which we suffered—how tender a mercy guided the hand that dealt each stroke of pain."

Sheba was silent. They had come to a standstill beside the well, and her eyes rested on its dark mysterious depths. Was it an emblem of human life, the life that lay before her, into which she longed, yet feared, to gaze? Involuntarily she turned to her companion. "I am glad," she said simply, "that I have met you. I think you will do me good."

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### SOME TRAITS IN SHEBA'S CHARACTER.

NOEL HILL had taken his departure, tea was over, and Sheba, to compensate for her disappointment respecting the Crow's Nest had seized her "Arabian Nights," and made off to the garden unobserved. In a moment more she had swung herself up to her leafy bower, and, safely hidden from sight, plunged into the delicious, if not strictly moral adventures of Nourddin and the Beautiful Persian. She had fulfilled her usual duties of feeding the fowls with Indian corn, finding the eggs, and giving Billy and the dogs their supper. Now she was free to amuse herself till bed-time as she had no lessons to prepare for Noel Hill.

Mrs. Ormatroyd had delivered to her a long lecture on the importance of attending to her new teacher and benefiting by

such a very superior and unusual instructor. "He will only be here a year," she said in conclusion, "so I trust you will make the most of such an opportunity. Very few girls are so fortunate as to get any education at all in this detestable place."

Mrs. Ormatroyd hated Australia, and rarely spoke of it without the prefix of an uncomplimentary adjective. Sheba had listened to the harangue very quietly; she had been unusually excited all day, but excitement with her only took the form of intense quietness. She felt too deeply for outward display, a characteristic which had been so far misconstrued as to win for her such appellations as "sulky," "cold," "morose," from the various members of her family, and for sake of which she had shed many bitter tears in secret.

But then children who are cold and stiff and awkward in public, and weep bitterly over their shortcomings in private, are not a class that are comprehensible, or that parents ought to encourage. There is a general rule and system laid down for the bringing up of children; it has broad and safe lines, and is not too difficult for the capacity of ordinary fathers and mothers. It certainly has one drawback: it makes no allowance for difference of intellect, or temperament. But that is a mere detail, and deals only with a very small class, who are decidedly uncomfortable, and indeed ought to be suppressed, if the thing could be managed without the slight inconvenience of "consequences," such as coroners' inquests. Sheba belonged to this uncomfortable order. What answered with Hex did not answer with her. What had been the traditional "bringing up" in her mother's family, who were mostly girls, and in her father's, who were mostly boys, seemed strangely inadequate in Sheba's case. Having no other stores of experience to draw upon, both Mr. and Mrs. Ormatroyd deemed it best to give her over to the care of this self-offered instructor, though neither of them felt very hopeful as to results.

Sheba was, as her mother often said, a trial. She was always forgetting to do the things she ought to do, and had a perfectly marvellous aptitude for doing those she ought *not* to do. Her appearance was—to say the least of it—unprepossessing; that is to say in the eyes of any woman who had been handsome herself, and would have liked to have a somewhat more accurate copy of her features and complexion than Sheba represented. Then, as before stated, she was unamiable and obstinate, and perpetually in disgrace about one thing or another. She was, in fact, the very last sort of girl to find favour in the eyes of her family, for they were sensible, even-balanced, prosaic people, who did not recognize cleverness, discredited genius, and rated the every day

gifts and uses of life far more highly than its eccentricities. Sheba—to them—was an eccentricity, and the perpetual endeavour to pare off her rough edges, subdue her waywardness, and turn her into that regulation specimen of milk and water womanhood, "a young lady," had only proved a total failure.

Such studies as she liked she would throw herself into heart and soul, but in like manner she displayed a mulish obstinacy in *not* acquiring those she disliked, or considered useless. French she hated, but Latin she adored. Arithmetic was her *bête noire*, yet for mathematics as a science she held an unlimited reverence. Music as an Art she would have loved passionately, but to wade to its beauties through the medium of five-finger exercises and scales, and be told that singing was simply the mastering of a certain number of "*solfeggi*," seemed to her nothing short of sacrilege, and was sufficient to prevent any further effort on her own part to perfect the musical education which Mrs. Ormatroyd had struggled with since she was eight years of age. Her memory was quick and accurate, but only for things she liked; all else were steadily and perseveringly forgotten as soon as taught. It may be judged therefore that she was somewhat of a trial to put up with, and as she was not one of those children who are called "taking," there was nothing external to compensate for her troublesomeness and her deficiencies.

Hex, now, was bright, fair and handsome and loving, and had always been the object of his mother's adoring worship, but Sheba—poor Sheba! Well, as her historian I must confess to feeling distinctly sorry for her. She might have been so different, and apparently from sheer perversity, she was not.

The human species seem to me to represent a gigantic puzzle that has been all shaken up, and then thrown down to get assorted haphazard; the result is that the pieces are all scattered about and always trying to join themselves, or joining themselves, as the case may be, at wrong ends. Rarely, very rarely, two or three of the right pieces form a harmonious combination, but the general rule are odds and ends, and the result is—well, what Sheba was to the Ormatroyds.

When, the previous evening, Mr. Ormatroyd had sought the privacy of his mosquito curtains after a smoke in the veranda with his two guests, he had fairly astonished his wife by informing her that he had arranged with Mr. Hill to take charge of Sheba's education, and that that gentleman had been much struck by what he termed the girl's unusual abilities.

When Mrs. Ormatroyd had mastered her first feeling of surprise, not to say indignation, she took comfort to herself to

reflecting *audibly* that it was to herself Sheba was indebted for these abilities, their culture, and their present state of promise. It therefore became an easier matter to yield to her husband's persuasions, and resign the unwelcome charge of education into other, though be sure she would not acknowledge the possibility of their being more capable, hands. "It will be a weight off my mind," she answered after a long discussion for and against. "But I don't know how he will manage her. She is so extremely difficult to get on with, and generally ends her lessons with a flood of tears, or a fit of sulks. She has a most wonderful aptitude for tears. I never can get her to read King Charles I.'s execution, or Joseph and his Brethren, without a burst. Such babyish nonsense, crying over people who are dead and buried ages ago! I quite despair of making her a sensible woman. And she is so plain; I'm sure she will always be a trial to me!"

"Oh!" said Mr. Ormatroyd cheerfully, "perhaps she will get prettier. She does not look so ugly when she has a colour, and those dark sallow children often alter very much. However, being ugly is one reason why she ought to be well educated. Clever women often take better than merely pretty ones. It is not always," he added, by way of a judicious compliment, "that a woman is fortunate enough to combine both qualities."

"No," said Mrs. Ormatroyd, with a satisfied recollection of her own fair skin and regular features and well-balanced mind; "no, my dear Horace, it is not."

Then there was silence, broken only by the buzz of the mosquitoes and the soft splash of rain dripping from the verandah eaves, but thus it came to pass that the Rev. Noel Hill presented himself to Sheba next day in the light of a teacher, and that—to use her own words—she "felt he would do her good." She had been singularly unmolested that day, and as a matter of course she felt unusually amiable as she sat in her leafy chamber and revelled in the "Beautiful Persian's" adventures. Hex had gone off with some of his schoolfellows to play cricket, a game in which Sheba also was a proficient, but which she had not cared to indulge in on this special evening.

How still and cool it was in that green nest of hers. The shy birds came fluttering on the boughs, and perched themselves close to the silent figure. A faint wind that had sprung up at sunset rustled the thick green leaves; the scent of roses, growing wild and luxurious in the garden beds below, stole softly upwards like a message of delight.

The girl's eyes lifted themselves from the page before her; they were soft, rapt, humid with the birth of new thoughts and

sweeter fancies than ever her heart had known. What was this love of which she had read—the love of one human being for another; the all-absorbing devotional passion which drew its life but for and with that other life it worshipped? Was there really in the world anything so glorious and beautiful, and might it one day bless her own heart; that heart which so ached and longed for the unknown and unattainable; that heart which even to herself was such a mystery? Into its depths she had almost feared to gaze; those depths where strange fancies and desires slumbered like dreams that are yet undreamt.

A sense of awe came over her, tears rushed hot and swift to her eyes; it was as if she had received a shock, a revelation that terrified, even while it gladdened her, and like a mighty wind it rushed through those closed chambers, sweeping them clear of all they had previously held—all her childish whims and fancies, and the small petty cares that reached no further than the "to-day" that called them forth.

The great measureless depths of the sky lay stretched above her head; the clear radiance of the full moon lit it from end to end, and all the still beauty of the summer night was heavy with sweet odours. She clasped her hands tight, her breath came swift and panting through her parted lips; she leant against the boughs and closed her eyes in a sudden ecstasy. What did it mean? What had come to her? Might life be happy after all, and were her dreams possible? Would this wide hopeless yearning that had made her so unhappy be swept away on the stronger current of something greater, better, more soul-filling? Might there be some one, even now—waiting—hoping—looking for her as the fulfilment of his life, even as he would be the completing of her own? The blood flushed hot and swift to her cheek, her heart beat stormily. The sense of her own nature, the imperious faculty of dawning womanhood stirred and woke within her breast, and seemed to point out duties, responsibilities—ay, and reward. Life was not a thing of dreams, though dreams might be its resting moments, it meant action, duty, sacrifice; it was not a thing of self—to be spent and exhausted in one narrow groove—but meant for individual help and comfort, widespread sympathy and patient endeavour that would reach to sublime heights even over a martyr's path of thorns.

It suddenly seemed to her that she had been very wicked and very selfish. She had wept in secret over her faults and shortcomings, but had she ever really tried to amend them? Had she not rather resented punishment as an injustice, than accepted it as her due? Had she not been wilful, passionate, disobedient

all the years she could remember? How was it possible then that she could have won love or consideration? Then suddenly she thought of Noel Hill; how kind he had been, how different to any one she had ever met, how generously he had behaved about that awful sermon of hers, of which she never thought now without a tingle of shame from head to foot. "I'm sure," she said opening her eyes at last, as she reached this point of her reflections, "the devil must have found my soul 'swept and garnished' that Sunday afternoon, and so just came in and had a good time of it there. Oh, I shall never forget it as long as I live! Never!"

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## CHAPTER IX.

### COMPARING NOTES.

**SHEBA** had just reached this point in her reflections, when she was aroused by the sound of voices in the verandah.

The air was so still and resonant that she could hear them distinctly, though the garden was some distance from the house and separated from it by another smaller flower garden, which was at present a glowing confusion of scarlet roses, variegated hydrangea, tall fuchsias and various other brilliant tropical plants. The two gardens were separated by a small fence of the usual palings.

Wondering who the visitors were, Sheba put her books carefully between a forked bough, and then proceeded to climb a little higher in order to catch sight of the verandah.

She succeeded in discerning the flutter of a dress, and listening more intently, she heard the voice of Mr. Saxton. Down she scrambled from her tree like a young squirrel, and in another instant was speeding over the beds, and had dashed through the little wooden gate that separated the inner from the outer garden.

Flushed and panting, her hair like a lion's mane about her shoulders, and her cotton dress embellished by a huge rent, made by its catching in a rose bush as she had dashed by—so Sheba presented herself at the steps of the verandah.

Mr. Saxton was there, and beside him stood a tall fair girl, who, to Sheba's astonished eyes, seemed a very vision of beautiful and fashionable young ladyhood.

In the horrified pause that followed the girl's advent, a sense of her own shortcomings was—for the first time in her wild life—brought forcibly home to her mind by contrast.

Then she heard Mr. Saxton's cheery voice, and woke to a due knowledge of her surroundings. "Why, here is my little friend," he said heartily. "Bessie, my dear, this is Miss Sheba Ormatroyd, who, as I told you, was so anxious to make your acquaintance. I hope you will be very good friends."

Now, it is an odd thing, but girls at an introduction are quite as stiff as boys, and quite as likely to look and feel antagonistic if their elders suggest the possibility of friendship.

The very mention of the word seems aggressive, and they mentally measure swords with each other, even as they shake hands with the unexpressive formality that is enforced by all precedents of civilization.

Bessie Saxton, tall and graceful, and neat and pretty, put a small silk-gloved hand into Sheba's brown and, I am sorry to say, not over-clean one. The dark eyes flashed interrogation at the blue, then the hands dropped, and Miss Saxton and Miss Ormatroyd, aged respectively fifteen and thirteen were prepared for hostilities. "What a wild-looking little horror," ran the reflections of fifteen, English, insular and proper.

"How different to what I expected," thought thirteen, wild natural and impulsive.

Then Mrs. Ormatroyd, who was a woman as rarely devoid of tact as might be found in a day's journey, came to the rescue, volubly and aggressively.

"Gracious, Sheba! What a sight you look! I am ashamed of you. Go to your room and wash yourself, and tidy your hair, and then come and talk to Miss Saxton, and—Oh, just look at your dress. Why you've torn it from the gathers to the hem."

"Phooh! Never mind," said Mr. Saxton good-humouredly. "We don't expect drawing-room young ladies in the bush. I told Bessie she was much too fine. She ought to wear cottons and plain straw hats, not feathers and furbelows."

"We don't consider this the bush," said Mrs. Ormatroyd, with the dignity befitting a clean starched muslin of many flounces and vivid colouring. "You should have seen Tanilba."

"Tanilba was a thousand times better than this," interposed Sheba aggressively. "It never mattered there how you were dressed, or indeed if you weren't dressed at all. The 'gins' never were."

"Sheba!" cried her mother in a shocked voice and with a frown of much promise. "Go to your room, and do what I told you at once!"

The girl's lips opened, her eyes glowed defiantly, then suddenly she turned away without a word, her face very pale and her mouth

sternly set. "My temper again," she said in her heart, "and I was going to be so good. But, oh, why—why does mother always aggravate me so?"

In accordance with those new resolves of humility and obedience that she had made in her tree of refuge, Sheba took herself to her room, plunged her face into cold water, brushed her "lion's mane" into something like neatness, and pinned up the rent in her frock. Then she looked at herself in the glass, and made a grimace. "Oh!" she said, "there's no doubt about it. I'm absolutely and undeniably hideous! What must I look like beside her? A friend! Fancy thinking she would ever be a friend. Why, she looks afraid of me."

Then she laughed somewhat bitterly, though a sudden hot smart in the great sad eyes seemed to say that mirth was further away than tears, and flinging the towel over the offending looking-glass, she went slowly back to the verandah.

Mrs. Ormatroyd looked somewhat surprised as she advanced. It would have been far more in accordance with Sheba's usual behaviour to have gone off altogether, or have appeared just as the visitors were leaving, but her subdued and altered demeanour quite astonished her mother, and led her to hope that Noel Hill had been instilling the first principles of obedience into that obstinate nature during the long afternoon talk that had represented his first lesson.

"Now, my dear," she said to her young visitor, "would you not like to go round the garden with my little girl? she will show you her pets. Now be sure, Sheba, you don't allow Billy to butt at Miss Saxton, and don't take her into wild places, where she will get her dress torn. It's all very well for you, but she is not accustomed to bush ways and habits."

"Will you come?" asked Sheba with unwonted gentleness.

"Oh, certainly. I shall be very pleased," answered the visitor rising, and in another moment the two girls were crossing the yard together.

"What on earth made you come here dressed out like that?" asked Sheba with almost brutal candour. "It's much too good. White muslin, isn't it? I thought people only wore it at parties."

"Dear me, no," answered the English girl. "This is quite an ordinary dress. My others are nearly all silk, or grenadine, or fancy stuffs."

"They won't be much use here, then," said Sheba. "And how are you going to get them up? Can you do them yourself?"

"*Get them up?* I—I don't understand," said Bessie Saxton, somewhat bewildered.



"I mean wash and iron and goffer all those frills and flounces. You won't find a servant to do it, I'm sure. Even our plain cottons mother has to starch and iron. The girl only washes them."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed her companion, "what a dreadful place. What ever made papa come here?"

"Oh!" said Sheba cheerfully, "the place isn't so bad. There are hundreds worse. And you can get to Sydney and back in a day. Think of that. Now at Tanilba——"

"Oh, your mother did nothing but talk about Tanilba," said the girl peculiarly. "I don't want to hear any more of it. That's the place where you said the women——"

"Wore no clothes. Yes; they did look funny I can tell you; jolly cool it must have been, and then when you went for a walk and came to a creek, you could just step in and have a bath without the trouble of undressing. I often wish I could do it."

"Do you mean," ejaculated Bessie, "that you bathe in creeks—in the open air!"

"Of course. Why not? So will you if you're sensible. All the water has to be brought from a well, here, and at the Crow's Nest. A servant won't carry enough buckets of it for baths. I and Hex always go to the creek. There's a jolly one about two miles off. We get up at five o'clock to have our dip, and then come home to breakfast. When it's very hot here you can't go out in the middle of the day at all, you know."

"And you have lived in Australia all your life?" said Bessie curiously.

"Yes, and you in England? Ah, do tell me something about England. I long to know. Australians always call it 'home,' you know, and every one of them in their hearts, hopes to see it some day."

"Do they? Well, it certainly is very different to this. I can hardly blame them for wishing to know what civilization really is."

"What do English people do when they first know each other?" asked Sheba eagerly, forgetting all about her new friend's airs and graces and toilette in the excitement of a new interest.

"What do they do!" echoed Bessie Saxton. "Well, they exchange calls, and then—well—then I think one asks the other to dinner."

"Oh, that will do!" interrupted Sheba. "It is just exactly as I thought. I remember reading somewhere that no Englishmen consider a friendship ratified until they have had a 'feed' together, which means stuffing themselves with a dozen courses,

and drinking champagne. I think the idea is odious. I am quite sure we shan't ask you to dinner. We haven't near enough plates, and—and other things. And our servant can't cook anything at all. Mother has to do it, or I, and it would be a great deal too much trouble to ask people to dinner under the circumstances."

Bessie Saxton stopped in the middle of the walk, and surveyed her outspoken companion with undisguised surprise.

"What a funny child you are," she said. "And do you mean to say you can cook?"

"Rather!" said Sheba emphatically. "I could cook a dinner when I was ten years old, and I can make 'dampers' as well as any digger. But I suppose you don't know what a 'damper' is."

"Oh, yes, I do. Papa told me. I can't think what made him come here," she added mournfully. "Such a place, too, as we have to live in. Aunt Allison is in an awful way about it. And then a Chinaman for a cook!"

"Chinamen are the best cooks in the world," said Sheba. "They have them at Government House."

"I'm sure I don't care what they have at Government House," said Miss Saxton tossing her fair head contemptuously. "It doesn't concern me. But I must say I never expected to see such a wilderness of desolation as the Crow's Nest; and then to be told one must live there. It's perfectly dreadful!"

"Why did Mr. Saxton come out to Australia at all?" asked Sheba.

"Oh, he has to see after some railways, I believe, ever so far off, and he thought he would leave us all here, to be out of harm's way, I suppose."

"There are a great many of you, are there not?" asked Sheba; "your father told me so, and all girls. Are you very fond of each other?"

"Not particularly. They are so wild and troublesome, and so much younger than myself."

"You—I should fancy you were never wild or troublesome," said Sheba with quite unconscious sarcasm.

"I hope not," said Miss Saxton with dignity. "I have been very carefully brought up."

"And weren't the others?" demanded Sheba.

"You ask a great many questions," said her companion, looking at her with those clear blue eyes that were as cold as the skies of her own land.

"Isn't that the only way of procuring information?" returned Sheba, unabashed by the look or the implied rebuke.

"I have been wondering," said the English girl, "how old you are. You look about ten."

"I am thirteen," said Sheba indignantly. "Almost fourteen," she added with that injudicious hurrying on of years that is natural to extreme youth. "I am small, I know, but I have grown very much this last year. My frocks are only just over my knees, and last year they were quite long for me."

"And I suppose you go to school?"

"Oh, no," said Sheba laughing. "Why, there isn't a school in the place, except for boys. I have always learnt at home. However," she added proudly, "I am going to have a master now. He is coming to-morrow, and he is to teach me Latin and Greek and mathematics and——"

"Goodness!" ejaculated her companion. "What odd things for a girl to learn. Why doesn't he teach you something sensible?"

"What do you call sensible?" demanded Sheba turning and facing her under the great pear tree.

"French, and music, and drawing, and—well, English literature. Those are things girls learn in England."

"And does it make them like—you?" asked Sheba, her lip curling contemptuously.

"I—well I suppose so," said Miss Saxton complacently. "They might easily be worse."

"Or better," said Sheba quickly.

"You are very rude."

"And you are very conceited."

"I think," said Miss Saxton with dignity, "we had better return to the house; it is not very interesting to stand here quarrelling."

Quick compulsion swept over Sheba's heart. Here she was at her old fault, losing her temper and actually being rude to a guest, behaving more like an aborigine than a well brought-up young lady.

"I beg your pardon," she said impulsively. "I'm afraid I was rude. You see I'm not used to girls, and the boys—well, it's just give and take with them, you know. I really didn't mean to offend you. I should like to be friends. I—oh, I have so *longed* for a girl friend, and when I heard that you were coming, and your father told me your name, I made quite a picture of you in my mind, and I even thanked God in my prayers that He had put it into your father's head to come here. I did indeed, and though you're quite different to what I thought, and I felt a little disappointed when I saw you first, still we might be friends after all, mightn't we . . . if—if you wouldn't mind?"

Bessie Saxton laughed; she could not help it. "You really," she said, "are the very oddest girl I ever came across. I wonder if all Australians are like you. Why, to hear you talk one would think you were twenty, and to look at you——"

"Ten. You said that before," said Sheba humbly. "Don't repeat it, please. I do so want to be old and grown up, and the years are so slow."

"Grown-up people say they will soon mend of that," said Bessie Saxton.

"I can't fancy it. But are you going in? Have you seen enough of the garden? There is a lot more, and the well, and the green frogs, and my goat——"

"Thanks," said Miss Saxton hastily. "I think what I've seen will do, and it'll be getting dark, and we've a long way to walk."

"Dark!" and Sheba laughed aloud. "Why, it will be as light as this all night long. I can see to read the smallest print up to dawn, for I've tried it on hot nights when I couldn't sleep. However," she added with an attempt at politeness, "I daresay the garden doesn't interest you, so we will go back if you wish. Would you—would you mind telling me if you have brought many books with you from England?"

"Lots," said her companion quickly. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh!" cried Sheba rapturously, "perhaps you will lend me some now and then. I do so love books. I'd walk barefooted to Sydney only to get one. What are yours like?"

"Novels, I think, chiefly, and travels, and some dry ones of papa's. I never looked at anything but the covers of those."

"And what," asked Sheba curiously, "are novels? I've never read one."

"Never read a novel! Dear me!" exclaimed Miss Saxton with a new sense of importance besides that of possessing white muslins, and hats with feathers. "Why, ladies in England hardly ever read anything else. They are works of—of fiction, you know, and all about love and marriage and—sometimes a murder. There was one that had just come out when I was leaving England, and I got papa to buy it. It's 'Lady—' oh, I never can remember titles—'Lady—Somebody's Secret.' I know she pushes her husband down a well and kills him, or nearly kills him, and marries some one else, and then it's all found out at last, and I believe she takes poison. There's another where the girl runs off with her groom. That also has a murder."

"Oh, how dreadful," said Sheba. "Are all novels like that? They must be horrid."

"Oh, no. Some are very namby-pamby, but these are of the

new school, the sensational. It is the rage now. Each new writer tries to do something more startling than the others have done. I don't know where they'll end. Aunt Allison said I was not to read this one I've told you about; that it wasn't fit for young girls, but I didn't pay any attention, and I got it on the sly and read it every word, and she knows nothing about it."

"But surely," said Sheba gravely, "that wasn't a right thing to do. It was deceitful."

"Do you mean to say," asked Miss Saxton opening her blue eyes very wide, "that you never have done anything you were told not to do? My! you must be a little Puritan!"

"I wouldn't do anything mean or dishonourable," said Sheba gravely, "and I'd sooner die than tell a falsehood. If mother forbade *me* to read a book she wouldn't have to hide it. I shouldn't think of opening it without her leave."

"Dear me," sneered Miss Saxton, "I suppose those are aboriginal virtues. I'm afraid you wouldn't find girls like yourself in England. Why, at school my greatest delight was to break rules, and I was hardly ever found out, I did it so cleverly."

"Oh!" said Sheba doubtfully. "Well, somehow it doesn't seem to me *right*. It's not the finding out that I should care for, it's the feeling of having done wrong. I can't see where the delight would be."

"You primitive little thing! I declare you're quite as funny as your name. By the way who gave you your name?"

"Do you mean me to answer like the catechism?" laughed Sheba. "I believe my father fixed on it. It belonged to some ancestress of his, for whose life and sayings he had a great reverence in his boyhood. I suppose it does seem an odd name at first."

"Very odd," said the English girl. "Quite heathenish, I thought."

"It can't be that," said Sheba indignantly, "for it's in the Bible."

"Well, the Queen of Sheba was a heathen, or came from some heathen place, I know," answered the other. "But, after all, it's not of much consequence. My name's Bessie, you know; it's about as common as yours is peculiar; but you can call me it if you like. Oh, by the way," she added as they neared the verandah, "what is this master of yours like—young or old?"

"Young," said Sheba. "He is a clergyman, and the nephew of Mr. Payne, our old clergyman here."

Sheba had never heard of "vicar" or "rector." To her mind a clergyman was a clergyman, whatever his position in the world clerical.

"A clergyman," said Miss Saxton contemptuously. "Oh, another goody-goody. How slow it will be. Is he handsome?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Sheba doubtfully, "you had better come here to-morrow and see him yourself. I never thought about his looks."

"You little innocent. Really, you might have lived in Arcadia to judge by your ideas. Well, I think I will come over and see him. Even a curate is better than nothing in a God-forsaken place like this."

Then she ascended the verandah steps, and made herself so pleasant and entertaining to Mrs. Ormatroyd, that that lady, who prided herself on her faculty of reading character, spent all the rest of the evening in praising her young visitor's charms of manner, mind and appearance, and wishing that Providence had seen fit to bless *her* with such a daughter, ending up her raptures by beseeching Sheba to copy her new friend in everything if she wished to grow up amiable and intelligent. "You will never be so charming a girl," she added in conclusion, "but at least you may become pleasing."

"And deceitful," Sheba added to herself, remembering the novel that had been secured so cleverly, and the broken rules, and general want of straightforwardness in Bessie Saxton's account of her school life. However, she made no remark as her mother rhapsodied on; it was but a cross the more to bear, and had she not determined that very morning that she would keep guard over tongue and temper, and strive to be more dutiful than was her wont?

Her own will was not to be the centre of her desires any longer, and the strange impulse that had swept over soul and sense seemed to her like a direct message by which she was to guide her life for the future. She could not begin too soon, and therefore, though she knew Bessie Saxton's character was as far removed from what her mother declared it to be, as light from darkness, she listened humbly and silently, and tried not to feel hurt that another should have won so easily the good opinion that her own young perplexed life had been one vain struggle to attain. Every one was hard on her; she was used to it, and really sometimes minded it very little. Still to-night it was a somewhat sore and troubled heart that she took with her to rest, and she could not help acknowledging that the advent of the ardently desired "friend" had not proved altogether so satisfactory as yesterday it promised to be.

In her prayers that night Sheba did not allude to Bessie Saxton, neither did she invoke any special blessing on her head. She

made up her mind that she would see a little more of her before troubling Providence on her behalf, or asking for any improvement in her nature.

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## CHAPTER X.

### LESSONS.

NOEL HILL was of a somewhat enthusiastic disposition. He had distinct views of his own, and they had always been of a kind to improve and elevate the tone of general life. He had been quite famous at college, and great things had been prophesied of him. The serious bent of his mind had inclined him towards the Church, and it had been a great trial when his health broke down, and the fiat of science had gone forth, which decreed a voyage to Australia instead of the work he had desired to accomplish.

It was just when the question of that sea voyage was on the *tapis*, that Noel Hill's father remembered he had a half-brother settled in some remote region of Australia from whom he heard at intervals of time extending over five or more years. It occurred to Mr. Hill, senior, that this gentleman might receive his son, and that being a clergyman also, the plan would suit both parties equally well.

Noel therefore departed armed with a letter of introduction to his uncle, and having found out that gentleman's place of abode and explained his own position, he was received with open arms. Mr. Payne was not at all sorry to have an assistant who would require no salary and whose abilities seemed unquestionable, and when Noel Hill informed him that he would much like to have a pupil or two with whom to read classics, he promised to do his best to procure them. He thought first of the Ormatroyds. Hex was old enough to dip into Horace and Virgil, and have a grind at mathematics. Then there were the Sandersons: the father was—well, not to put too fine a point on it, there were rumours of convict ancestry—but the boys were fine, frank, intelligent fellows, and surely they would help to form a class independent of their school studies. He was quite sure it could be managed, and became quite enthusiastic on the subject as he broached it to the Ormatroyds. He met with no objection there; Mr. Ormatroyd had all an Englishman's belief in the virtue of Latin and Greek and conic sections, and was only too pleased that his son should have the chance of such valuable instruction as could be procured from a "Varsity man." It was Noel Hill's own suggestion that Sheba

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should share her brother's studies, and as the school hours clashed somewhat, he arranged to take her in the morning for a couple of hours, and Hex and any of his schoolfellows who could manage it were to meet at the Parsonage in the evening twice a week.

Sheba's first lesson was as much a source of wonder to her teacher as to herself. They sat in the verandah—it being cooler than the house—and he commenced to take her miscellaneous store of information to pieces, bit by bit, like the mechanism of a clock. Some of it surprised him very much, but on the other hand her ignorance of most ordinary subjects was quite as singular. "I have only learnt what I liked," Sheba affirmed. "Mother and I have had terrible battles, but she always had to give in."

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Then Noel Hill gently, but firmly, gave her to understand that if he was to be teacher and she pupil, he must exact strict obedience to his directions, and proceeded to explain that, dry and uninteresting as rules of grammar were, it was impossible to speak or write correctly and fluently without mastering their intricacies.

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"You say you love writing themes," he went on gravely. "But you cannot acquire style or elegance, or form of expression, without studying the art of composing sentences in different ways. For instance, some of those you have shown me are full of tautology, and you construct your sentences with unvarying sameness. You have a very vivid imagination. That is a natural gift, but you must learn to utilize it and expend its forces more equally if you really wish to derive any good from it."

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"What good could I derive?" asked Sheba humbly.

"A great deal," he said. "You may become a writer, or a poet. I am sure you have written poetry, have you not?"

"Yes," she said, blushing crimson and dropping her eyes with sudden shyness.

"Oh," said Noel Hill smiling, "I am not going to ask you to show it me. I know how jealously we prize those first fledglings of imagination, and how we dread any critical eye beholding them. I am merely stating what I think you are capable of doing, and telling you the best way of doing it."

"I should love to write," said Sheba, her great liquid eyes flashing up to her teacher's face. "Have women ever written books—really clever books that people care to read?"

"I should think so," laughed the young man. "Mrs. Browning and Mrs. Hemans are great poets, especially the former. Eliza Cook is another. There are more woman authors in England than I can name: Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Miss Muloch, besides the new school of sensational literature, which originates from a feminine source and will have hosts of imitators.



You see there is a chance for you, Miss Sheba. But to be a great writer you not only want a brilliant imagination and sound judgment, but a perfect literary style. Combine those forces and you may assure yourself of success and fame; separate them, rely merely on the brilliance and ease, not the care and finish, and you will obtain, perhaps, a *succès d'estime*, but nothing lasting or satisfactory; the summer season of the moth and the butterfly, no more."

Sheba drew a deep breath. "I will take your advice," she said, "and do exactly what you wish."

"Ah," he said, "now we shall get on. Just let us classify our studies, fix the days for each, and then we will see what progress you make. I am a great stickler for order and method. One thing at a time and that thoroughly. You have waded through your Latin grammar, I see; but what about Greek? Do you really wish to learn Greek?"

"If you please," Sheba said timidly. "Is it a thing girls usually learn?"

"I believe not," he said. "But then you are not a 'usual' little girl. Well, if you are so anxious we will give three mornings a week to Greek; the other three to Latin and English. What do you say?"

"It will be lovely," she answered, her eyes sparkling with delight.

"Now, then, as that is settled, give me the Latin grammar."

The time sped almost too quickly for Sheba. What a delightful teacher this was, and how in a few words he cleared away difficulties that had haunted her young brain for years.

The lesson was nearly over when the "click" of the gate latch made her look up. To her great surprise she saw Bessie Saxton in all the glories of a pale pink cotton, and hat of a shape and style utterly unknown to Sheba's Arcadian eyes, advancing towards the verandah.

The young lady came forward looking, so Sheba thought, far prettier even than on the previous evening. Noel Hill rose and bowed; it never entered Sheba's head that she ought to introduce him to her visitor.

"Well," asked Bessie, "have you finished your lessons? Aunt sent me round to ask you to come back with me, and spend the evening. Will you?"

"I should like to," said Sheba, "but," and she looked doubtfully at Noel Hill, "my lessons have to be prepared. I mustn't neglect them."

"Perhaps," he suggested, "you could do them before you go with your—friend." He looked inquiringly at Bessie.

She blushed and smiled, and tossed her pretty fair head. "My name," she said, "is Saxton. We have come to live at the Crow's Nest. I hope you will call to see us. It is terribly lonely, and after England——"

"You have just come from England then," he said, "so have I. The life here is a great contrast." He drew a chair forward. "Won't you sit down?" he said.

Sheba looked on wonderingly, and with a reluctant admiration for the quite "grown up" manners of Miss Saxton. She leant languidly back in her chair, and fanned herself with her broad-brimmed hat. She looked up at Noel Hill's face, and dropped her eyes, and smiled and blushed, in a way altogether puzzling to Sheba's uninitiated mind, innocent as yet of the faintest meaning of the word "flirtation." "I think," she interposed somewhat brusquely, "I will go and ask mamma what to do about going back with you."

"Yes, do," said Bessie languidly. "And I hope you can give me some lunch, for I'm half dead after this long walk."

"There's only cold beef," said Sheba, "and stewed fruit and rice. You must put up with that instead of the 'dozen courses' you would get in England."

"What an odd child that is," said Miss Saxton, as the girl disappeared through the open hall door. "I don't envy you your task of instructing her, Mr. Hill."

"Don't you?" he said smiling. "She is very clever and very quick. I am rather inclined to be proud of my pupil."

"I expect," she said critically, "it is superficial cleverness. Those quick children are almost always shallow."

"Well," said Noel Hill gravely, "time will show. I have my own opinion at present."

He could not help marvelling in his own mind at what period of feminine existence the faculty for disparaging each other's mental, or physical advantages, developed itself. Young as the new arrival was, she undoubtedly possessed it, and he regarded her with some interest after that remark.

Miss Saxton on her side was busy forming her own opinion of the young man. He was decidedly better-looking than she had imagined, though not quite tall enough or manly enough to satisfy her taste, which leaned to the muscular and "Guy Livingstone" type of manhood. Still, he would do to pass the time and keep her hand in, for Miss Saxton had determined that her life in life was to be *un peu coquette*; not too much, not anything of the sort that was provocative of deadly rivalry and bloodshed, but just *un peu*—the little delicate *nuances* of coquetry that are so

captivating and ensnaring; the exact antipodes of Sheba, who was brusque and rough and blundering, and as ugly and wild as a little Shetland pony in its native haunts.

So she leant gracefully back in the wicker chair and glanced ever and anon at Noel Hill from under her long fair lashes, and hoped he would take her for seventeen, and pay her a compliment on her appearance.

But nothing was further from Noel Hill's thoughts. He stood there turning over the leaves of the Latin grammar somewhat absently, and only waiting for Sheba's return to say good-bye.

He had a vague idea that this English girl was tall and lazy, and over-dressed, and inclined to look down upon his little bush girl, as he called Sheba in his own mind. Further than that he did not concern himself about her presence, being a man to whom feminine society was of very little importance, and who, at present, regarded the sex analytically rather than admiringly.

So the two maintained almost total silence, until presently Sheba burst in upon them with the announcement that her mother would be delighted if Miss Saxton would stay to lunch; "though we always call it dinner," Sheba added with her usual frankness, "and I may go back with you in the afternoon, but not till it gets cooler, so I can do my lessons before I go."

"Well, now I must say good morning," Noel Hill interposed. "I am glad," he added as he held Sheba's small brown hand for a moment, "that you are to have a little pleasure. 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,' you know."

"Oh," said Sheba, "no amount of work would make me dull. I love it too much."

"Still," said her preceptor gravely, "all excesses are bad; so I am going to look after you in more ways than one."

Then he shook hands with Miss Saxton and went away.

The two girls stood there and watched him, one critically, the other reverently.

"And what do you think of him?" asked Sheba eagerly, so soon as he was out of earshot.

"Oh," said Miss Saxton superciliously, "he is not bad. But I've not much opinion of curates. However, he'll do to keep my hand in."

"To keep your—hand—in," faltered Sheba extremely bewildered. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, you will learn soon enough, my dear," answered Bessie with an airy little laugh. "I don't want to disturb your innocence just yet. Ah, here comes your mother, and I hope it's to say lunch is ready, for I'm starving."

## CHAPTER XL

## A VISIT TO THE CROW'S NEST.

It was nearly five o'clock when the two girls set out for the Crow's Nest.

The road, though rough and uneven, was sheltered by huge gum trees which shut it in on either side, and the dense, thick growth of scrub and bush and flowering plants and broom-grass looked almost impenetrable, though Sheba had often plunged into their dense depths, and wandered for miles through their trackless maze.

She was telling her new friend some of her experiences and escapes as they walked along, how she had been lost once for a whole day and yet found her own way home again, with nothing to guide her save her memory of the trees and ravines she had passed.

"Weren't you frightened?" asked Bessie Saxton.

"No; I knew I should be sure to find my way in time. I have often wished I could find the place where I lost myself; I never saw anything so lovely. There was a waterfall quite two hundred feet, and beyond it a valley opened out, all green grass and wild flowers, and shut in by low, rocky hills. It was so lovely and so silent—only just the birds singing and the hum of the insects—I don't think any one had ever been there before."

"We might try and find it and have a picnic there," suggested Bessie. "Some one told me on the voyage that picnics were the only form of festivity you Australians know."

Miss Saxton said "you Australians" as though she meant you aborigines."

"A picnic!" Sheba laughed scornfully. "It is quite fifteen miles away," she said. "And there's no road. I suppose you'd scarcely care to tramp through the bush all that way and drag provision baskets with you?"

"No," said Bessie dubiously, "that would hardly do. But I suppose there are other places more accessible. I mean to get up a picnic if I can. Are there any men about, besides Noel Hill?"

"Is it English manners to call men by their Christian names almost as soon as you know them?" asked Sheba.

"Oh, I always do it; I got into the way at school. We were rather a go-ahead lot there, and it's so stupid to say 'Mr.' Besides, he's quite young. What does it matter? This is the last

place in the world where I should expect to find forms and ceremonies. But you haven't answered my question."

"There are no other *men*," said Sheba. "There are plenty of boys, and you have sisters younger than yourself, so they'd get on very well."

"What age are the boys?" asked Bessie.

"Let me see—Ted Sanderson, he's fifteen; Felix Short, fourteen; Bobby Burton, twelve; Hex, my brother, eleven—they're the best of the boys hereabout. The others are a vulgar lot. Ted's the best of them all. I have just promised to be his sweetheart."

"What!" Bessie Saxton stopped in the road, and stared in astonishment at her companion.

"Did you never hear of 'sweethearts?' Oh, it's a great institution here. I've had a great many. By-the-by, that just reminds me he will be expecting me in the wilderness this afternoon. He was to bring me some scent. They always bring me presents. I suppose that's what sweethearts are for!"

"You really," exclaimed Bessie, moving on again, "are the oddest child! The idea of your having a sweetheart. Does he think you're pretty?"

"Oh, no," laughed Sheba, shaking back her mane of hair. "No one with eyes in their head would think that. It's just an idea of his, that's all. You see there were no other girls about old enough to be sweethearts, so he chose me."

"And what," asked Bessie curiously, "do you do?"

"Well, we meet, and sometimes we go for walks together—and—well, then he brings me presents, as I told you. I think that's all."

"No spooning?" inquired Bessie, regarding her small friend with renewed interest.

"What's that? I never heard of such a thing," answered Sheba in astonishment.

"Didn't you? Then Australian sweethearts must be very different to those in other countries. Doesn't he want to kiss you?"

"Oh, yes, he always wants to do that," said Sheba frankly. "I think it's the worst part of the business myself, but boys are so funny! I daresay," she added, looking at her companion, "that Ted will want to be your sweetheart as soon as he knows you."

Miss Saxton tossed her fair head with contempt. "As if," she said superciliously, "I should look at a boy of fifteen!"

"But you are only fifteen yourself," said Sheba.

"Oh, yes, but then girls are grown up much sooner than boys

Why, I might marry at sixteen, but fancy *a husband* of sixteen ! The law wouldn't permit it."

"Marry," faltered Sheba. "Oh, but that has nothing to do with sweethearts."

"You little innocent. It generally begins with having a sweetheart. I really must lend you a novel or two just to enlighten you."

"Not the one about the woman who pushed her husband down the well, please," said Sheba. "I shouldn't like to fancy a woman doing such a wicked thing ; and when I read of people always seem to know them, and I get quite fond of them sometimes."

"Do you think, then, that women never do wicked things ?" asked her Mentor.

"I don't know," said Sheba ; "I am rather ignorant about them. But I should like to fancy they were good and kind, and wise and loving, and that the world was the better for having them."

"Well, the longer you live the more you will find out your mistake," said the young cynic of fifteen. "There are some very queer women in the world, I can tell you. We had a French girl at our school, and she used to tell us some nice stories about them, even about her own mother, who thought she was as innocent as a baby, and didn't know what—oh, but I mustn't enlighten you too much ; your time will come. But women are not angels, though of course they try to make men believe so, that is to say until they've hooked a husband. *Après—*"

She made a little airy gesture suitable to the rôle of "*une coquette*:" a little intangible shrug and wave of the hand studied from "the life," as artists say—the life being represented by Mdlle. Hélène de Latour, her former schoolfellow.

Sheba looked at her with dissatisfaction, her brows drawn in a somewhat stern line, her great eyes puzzled and full of doubt.

"So," she said at last, "that is what girls learn at school. I'm glad I never went to one."

"It will be all the same as if you had, a few years hence," said Bessie disdainfully. "You needn't pretend to be so prudish. The moment a girl is grown up and goes into the world, she learns how much more evil there is in it than good. And, after all, naughty people are much more amusing than good ones. There was a woman on the steamer coming out—well, she wasn't particularly pretty, and she had been divorced *twice*, and yet all the men were round her like bees after honey, and the quiet ones never had an admirer at all. It is really much better to be *chic* than proper. I mean to be !"

Fortunately these sayings were Greek to Sheba, whose only knowledge of such a word as "divorce" came from the Bible and to whom marriage seemed a far-off and sacred mystery about which she had not yet begun to speculate. But she felt considerably astonished at Bessie Saxton's worldly knowledge and wisdom, and for the rest of the walk listened in bewildered silence to her stream of information and wondered if the other girls would be like her.

They reached the Crow's Nest at last and were greeted by hilarious shouts from the remaining Misses Saxton, who were watching for their arrival very impatiently.

Bessie treated them with the serene dignity of an elder sister but Sheba was delighted with the merry girl-faces, the untidy frocks and torn hats, which seemed at once to draw her toward them in a bond of sympathy.

They were very friendly, these three younger Saxtons. Flo was a wild hoyden just a year older than Sheba; Bee was twelve and Nora a perfect picture of lovely childish, dimpled, ten.

After greetings had been exchanged, they marched Sheba to be introduced to "Aunt Allison," a tall, slender, dove-eyed woman with the sweetest face Sheba had ever seen, and in the kindest manner. She put the shy awkward girl at her ease at once, and then they all had tea out in the verandah—a tea which to Sheba's eyes was a fairy-like meal, so daintily was it set out with flowers and fruits, and silver and china, and delicious cakes and wonderful hot scones, the work of John Chinaman, which Miss Saxton declared was a marvel in the way of cooks.

Sheba noticed that Bessie was very silent and subdued in her aunt's presence. She neither indulged in her French *minauderie* nor her English cynicism. But she did not show herself in altogether amiable light, and none of her sisters seemed very fond of her. Directly tea was over she carried Sheba off to see her dresses, greatly to the disgust of the younger ones, who wanted her to come into the garden. Unhappily the dresses did not interest Sheba; in fact, their fine material and elaborate style only represented to her the inconvenience of wearing them and behaving in a manner suitable to their importance.

"I'd never wear anything but cottons and brown holland could help it," she said, as Bessie expatiated on the beauties of delicate pink silk, not yet made up, but which she was reserved for some festivity in Sydney.

"No wonder, then, you look such a guy," exclaimed Bessie petulantly. Her temper was ruffled by Sheba's exasperating unappreciativeness. After taking out all these treasures of millinery

and dazzling her visitor's eyes with delicate fabrics and exquisite shades of colour, to be told that cotton and brown holland were preferable! Sheba would never be *chic*.

"Do I look a guy?" asked Sheba with perfect equanimity.

The truth did not hurt her at all. She had heard that she was ugly ever since she could remember. It was no news to her.

She turned to the glass on the toilet table and surveyed herself critically.

What a contrast indeed to Bessie, with her fair wavy hair and her rose-leaf complexion, and her tall graceful figure that had none of the angularity and sharpness of girlhood, but was so rounded, and had such exquisite lines and curves. "Yes," she said with a sigh, "I am hideous; there's no denying it. But wishing won't make me any better, and as I told mother once if God had wanted me to be pretty, He would have made me so. I certainly can't help it."

"Did you really tell her that?" asked Bessie, laughing suddenly. "What fun! Whatever did she say?"

"I don't think she said anything," answered Sheba. "But she left off worrying for a time. I suppose," she went on doubtfully, "she looked from her own reflection to that of her friend, 'I suppose I couldn't improve myself, could I? My hair, now—yours is quite different. Those loose waves on your forehead are pretty.'"

"Oh, I could soon do yours like that, but I don't know if it would suit you," said Bessie doubtfully.

"But doesn't yours *grow* like it?" demanded Sheba in surprise.

"Bless your heart, no! It's done with crimping pins. It's all fashion in England. Just sit down a minute and I'll show you the way."

Sheba obeyed in some wonderment. Her friend took up a comb from the toilet table and separated a small portion of the front hair from the remainder; then brushed the great curling, heavy mass back, plaited it loosely in a tail and tied it with a piece of ribbon.

"Now," she explained, "this bit of hair I am going to cut and wave, it will then just fall a little over your forehead, and soften the outline of your face. It will do away with that strained, tight look of your hair. It doesn't suit you at all, taken off your face."

"That's what I always tell mother," said Sheba; "but she will do her way."

"Well, you ask her if this isn't an improvement," said Bessie emphatically, as snip, snip went the scissors, and the heavy locks



fell into Sheba's lap. The next moment she gave a cry of pain. "Oh, you mustn't mind being hurt for a little while," said Bessie laughing. "I have to keep my pins in all night, but your hair has a natural curl at the end, and I think it will fall prettily almost by itself. There," she added triumphantly, as she gave the pin a final twist, "now you can put on your hat, and we'll go into the garden. In about half-an-hour I'll take the pins out and you'll see how different you look! And you must really get your mother to buy you a new hat. There are some very pretty shapes in just now. That one of yours would make Venus herself look hideous."

"I don't know how it is," said Sheba ruefully, "but mother always *does* get me such ugly things. I quite dread a new hat or a new dress. Last winter I had one all red and yellow checks; it was dreadful. I loathed the sight of it! and I have to wear them. If she'd only let me choose my own colours—but she won't."

"Well, perhaps we'll mend her of that," said Bessie. "If you only begin to take an interest in your dress, and find out what suits you, it's wonderful how you can improve yourself. I've known girls quite as ugly as you look almost nice, just because the colours and styles of their clothes suited them. Now let's go out in the garden. I think papa has come home, and those young ones are making such a row."

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## CHAPTER XII.

### ANTICIPATIONS.

How Sheba enjoyed that evening, and how merry they all were in the great wild garden.

If the girl had been at a disadvantage in Bessie's dainty chamber with those stores of finery compelling her unwilling attention she certainly made up for it now. So fleet of foot, so quick of action, so joyous of laugh and jest, so forbearing to the elder girl's vaunted superiority, so gentle and sympathetic with little Nora who was used to being snubbed and never considered in any way.

Then to see her swing herself up a tree and flit from branch to branch as rapidly and easily as a squirrel, it was a marvel to the English girls, used only to prim walks in London parks, and the alternate confinement of nursery and schoolroom. When they found out you

They could play cricket they all wanted to learn, except of course the dignified Bessie, and as Nora had a ball, Sheba soon extemporized a bat for them out of a broken paling, and gave them their first lesson, winding up with "rounders," which to judge from the screams and shouts of laughter that resounded on all sides, was received with immense favour.

Mr. Saxton and his sister, attracted by the noise, came out at last to watch them.

"It is a treat to see a girl run like that," exclaimed Bessie's father, as he stood beside his eldest daughter. "Why don't you join them?" he added, as he glanced at that dignified young lady in her spotless gown and irreproachable hat.

"Oh," she exclaimed contemptuously, "I don't like tom-boy games."

"Sheba is not a tom-boy," said Mr. Saxton; "she is a perfectly natural specimen of girlhood. And she is very clever too. I wish there were more girls like her. They are too artificial and too much hampered by conventionality in the old country. Sheba is as different from the typical English girl, as light from darkness."

"Well, I wouldn't exchange places with her," said Bessie superciliously. "She is not a bad little thing, but so dreadfully old-fashioned, and then her looks——"

Mr. Saxton laughed. "Read the story of the ugly duckling," he said, "and never decide hastily about the looks of any one of Sheba's type."

"You are right," said Aunt Allison gently. "With such eyes and hair a girl would never be ugly. Look at her now that she has a colour."

At this moment Sheba came up to them; her hat was off, she had long ago discarded the crimping pins, and the short loose hair fell in a soft curling mass about her brows. Her cheeks had the loveliest carmine flush, and her great dark eyes were lustrous and beaming with excitement.

For one moment as Bessie Saxton looked at her, the sharpness of jealousy stabbed her heart. She saw in the girl possibilities she had never dreamed of, and before which her fair regular features, and carefully-arranged hair, looked commonplace and insignificant.

On Sheba was a glow as of hidden fire, passion, expression, feeling, genius. All held their abiding place in that girlish heart and all might lend their aid in the future to dower her with something far beyond the mere feminine prettiness which Bessie had estimated so highly.

"How hot you look," she said pettishly. "And what a tom-boy you are. How can you find any pleasure in romping like that?"

Sheba looked at the girl with openly expressed surprise. "Romping—" she said; "I suppose it did look rather wild, but they liked it."

"And so I should hope, did you," said Mr. Saxton smiling.

"Yes," she answered, but looking troubled as she saw Bessie's clouded face and averted eyes, "I like a game now and then, and it is a treat to me to have girls to play with. I have always had boys, you know, before to-night."

"I don't think they have done you much harm," said Mr. Saxton. "And what a famous runner you are; you skim over the ground like a bird."

She blushed and her eyes grew radiant. Praise was as the very breath of life to Sheba, who had been only used to hearing herself called awkward, and neglectful, and ugly, and stupid ever since she could remember.

"I am glad," she said softly, "that you don't think the worse of me because I can run and climb, and play cricket. Hex taught me. You see," she said apologetically, "I had not the advantage of your daughters. I have no sisters."

"I don't know," said Mr. Saxton, glancing from Bessie's clouded face to Floy's saucy one, "that you are any the worse for that. However," he added laughing, "we are quite ready to adopt you into our midst, and I see you have made yourself welcome very soon."

Again Sheba flushed and paled, and the tears came thronging to her eyes. It was so strange, so unusual, to hear any one speak to her like this. She could scarcely credit it. Before she could command herself sufficiently to reply, Aunt Allison approached and took her hand, smiling kindly down at her disturbed face.

"I think," she said, "it is my turn now to have a little talk with you. Come and walk round the garden with me."

Sheba looked gratefully at the kind sweet face. She never could have told in that, or any future time, how it was that Aunt Allison found her way straight to her heart. How she seemed to know instinctively the troubles and perplexities which weighted so heavily. She only knew that she seemed to breathe a new atmosphere of which love and consideration were component parts, and that never in all her life—which seemed long enough in retrospect and regrets—had she felt so richly and purely happy as on this night.

The girls were enchanted with her. Mr. Saxton had taken a fancy to her from the first. Aunt Allison seemed like that "ideal mother of whom she had dreamt in her hours of solitude. Bessie—well, perhaps there was an element of disappointment about

Bessie. She was not altogether what Sheba's fervid imagination had pictured, still she was the ideal girlhood, fair, graceful, fascinating, accomplished; a study full of complex interest, though with lurking shadows in the background that might fade or develop as chance should determine.

But the evening came to an end, and Hex made his appearance to bring his sister home, and was introduced to the family of Saxtons, and comported himself in the shy and bashful fashion peculiar to boys of his age, who look on girls as natural enemies, to be avoided carefully when possible. Sheba's leave-taking was fervent and regretful. She felt she liked them all, but if any one had asked her to whom her heart specially inclined, and whose words and face haunted her dreams that night, she would have said Aunt Allison.

Days and weeks drifted by in a very pleasant and happy monotony, after that visit to the Crow's Nest.

Mrs. Ormatroyd was graciously pleased to approve of that alteration in Sheba's hair; and as Bessie proved correct, and the short loose locks did curl naturally, Sheba was saved the tortures of crimping pins or curl papers, such as that young lady herself underwent nightly.

Noel Hill came with unfailing regularity, and Sheba studied and learned with an ardour that surprised him, much as he had expected from the girl.

This change in her life, this widening circle of ideas and associations, were gradually benefiting Sheba both mentally and physically. Her eyes lost their pathos and yearning, and grew soft and tender; her face lost its constant expression of rebellion and discontent, and became richer in colour and outline. She lost herself in dreams, even more vivid and passionate than before, but they were dreams with a purpose and an end. She amazed her mother by becoming submissive and obedient, and almost neglecting her "tom-boy" pastimes, save and except that one beloved weakness for tree-climbing to which she still clung. Hardly a day passed without her going to the Crow's Nest, or some one from there coming over to her, and the friendship between Bessie Saxton and herself became more pronounced as time went on.

Perhaps the only individuals who suffered from the change in Sheba were her sweethearts; she utterly neglected them, and even the favoured Ted Sanderson was rarely permitted to have an interview. There were more books at the Crow's Nest than all the boys' joint efforts could have collected, and under Aunt Allison's judicious superintendence, Sheba feasted on their treasures to her

heart's content. There were no novels among them, and when Bessie offered her one now and then, surreptitiously procured by herself, she always refused to read it. "Your aunt says I had better not," was her invariable rejoinder, and she was firm in adhering to that resolve, despite her friend's ridicule.

When the fiercest heat of the summer had passed, that idea of the "picnic" was again mooted and received with general favour. The subject of conveyances was long under discussion, as carriages of any description were luxuries unknown, but at last it was settled by no less a person than John Chinaman, who stated he had a friend who possessed a large dray and two fine strong horses, and that the said friend would be quite willing to place them at the disposal of the party—for a consideration.

The "consideration" not being altogether too exorbitant, it was resolved to accept the vehicle, and an awning was rigged up as a protection from sun or rain, and seats of all kinds, from bamboo chairs to empty boxes, were arranged for the convenience of the passengers. John Chinaman himself went as guide, for he had expressed himself as being intimately acquainted with a "muchee fine picnic place," where was "muchee fine water-muchee nice sea," and where they could feast and roam about to their heart's content.

No one of the party knew anything at all about the place, so excitement and speculation were rife as to its beauties and accessibility.

As for Sheba she had never in the whole course of her life experienced such an amount of expectation and delight as when the eventful day arrived, ushered in by serene skies and glorious sunshine, though already the year was waning and the leaves beginning to fall.

She had never been to a picnic before. Perhaps if she had her anticipations would have been less glorified. She was up at six o'clock and took her cold bath, and had a run round the garden with Billy, and fed the fowls and the pigeons, and then came back to the house with a glow in her cheeks and a light in her eyes that made her look almost pretty.

Then, after breakfast, she attired herself in a clean brown holland frock which did, for a wonder, reach her ankles, and put on a brown straw hat which Bessie had given her, declaring it did not suit herself. It certainly suited Sheba, and having discovered a late half-blown crimson rose in the garden she fastened it at her throat, and then dashed off in her usual impetuous fashion into the verandah to look out for the anxiously expected van, which was to come for their party at nine o'clock.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## A PROMISE.

"I DECLARE," said Noel Hill, "my little bush girl looks quite charming. What has she been doing to herself?"

He had just arrived and joined Hex and Sheba in the verandah. Mr. and Mrs. Ormatroyd had not yet put in an appearance. The latter was occupied in walking round the sitting-room, and lifting up various ornaments and books to ascertain whether the servant had dusted underneath them. It was difficult to convince Mrs. Ormatroyd that servants ever did their work properly, and she always liked to assure herself of the truth of their statements to that effect. Sheba had a foolish habit of asking the servant whether she had done so and so, and of believing her when she gave an affirmative response, but Mrs. Ormatroyd was not so rash.

There were still five minutes before the van was due, so she was employing her time in searching for dust—always an exciting occupation to her, and an unfailing resource for leisure moments like the present.

"Do I really look nice?" exclaimed Sheba delightedly, as she shook hands with the young clergyman. "Perhaps it's the hat—it's one of Bessie's, and she *does* have such pretty hats?"

"One of Bessie's," echoed Noel Hill. "Well, it does not look much like Miss Saxton's—too quiet—not enough feathers and things, I should say."

"Oh, here are the boys!" cried Sheba, ignoring the subject of Bessie's feathers; "three of them. Now we're all here, so I hope the van won't be late."

"Who is to drive?" inquired Noel Hill, as Hex dashed down to the gate to welcome his friends.

"Oh, John Chinaman's friend, I believe. Isn't it fun—none of us know where we're going?"

"Immensely exciting," said Noel Hill. "Let us hope there will be no bushrangers about."

"Bushrangers!" echoed Sheba with contempt. "Why, there isn't such a being in this district; they keep to the region of the golf-fields and mail-carts. They wouldn't touch us even if we saw any."

"I am not so sure of that!" said Noel Hill. "I came out here with distinct impressions of bushrangers, and I mean to stick to them."

"You had impressions of kangaroos and wallabies also," said

Sheba with fine scorn. "You thought they were bloodthirsty and terrible animals. What of them now?"

"Well," he said gravely, "I confess to being mistaken in the kangaroo; he is not so bloodthirsty as—the mosquito."

Sheba laughed. "They always like new arrivals," she said. "But I am sure I heard wheels. Oh, yes; there's the van. Doesn't it look nice!"

Off she dashed, and was out of the gate in a moment and exchanging greetings with the occupants of the vehicle; the younger members of the party being as excited as herself.

"You nice little brown girl," cried Floy. "You really look quite pretty—doesn't she, auntie?"

Aunt Allison smiled kindly at the wistful face turned towards her. "You have taken my advice, I see," she said. "I am glad of it. The result is very satisfactory."

"Come and sit next me, Sheba," cried Floy. "Here, I've kept my box for you."

Sheba glanced wistfully at Bessie, but that young lady bent forward, and whispered hurriedly, "I want Noel Hill next me."

So the girl mounted the somewhat awkward vehicle, and took the place Floy had reserved for her.

Presently the rest of the party appeared bringing more provision baskets, which had to be packed in by John Chinaman and his friend. Mrs. Ormatroyd secured a bamboo chair close to Aunt Allison; Noel Hill took the seat pointed out to him by Bessie and Ted Sanderson and Felix Short squeezed themselves in a corner close to Sheba and Floy. Then crack went the whip. The horses—fine, strong animals, with bells jingling at their harness—started off, and Noel Hill, glancing at Sheba's face of rapt delight, thought in his heart, "What gift of God is like that of youth, and the capacity to enjoy all it brings!"

The drive was for four hours over rough and uneven roads, through tracts of badly-cleared scrub; but the jolting and shaking only seemed to add to the merriment of the party, who, with the solitary exception of Mrs. Ormatroyd, had agreed to set dignity at defiance, and be thoroughly unconventional for once.

Yet, despite jests and anecdotes and laughter, it was with considerable satisfaction that the whole party hailed John Chinaman's announcement, "Here placee picnic—no memble namee—same, good placee picnic."

Out they all scrambled, and off went the young ones like a band of wild rabbits, to explore the neighbourhood, while their elders prepared the meal for which they were all quite ready.

The distant sound of falling water had attracted Sheba, and she

tried to persuade Bessie to accompany her in her search for the waterfall, but that young lady declined, having already had some experience of Sheba's reckless scrambles, and the perils and inconveniences thereof. Seeing the other youngsters scattered about in all directions, Sheba started off for the waterfall herself. Their present situation was in the heart of a little valley, beautifully cool and sheltered. Not half a mile off, the great ocean broke in massive billows on the rocky coast, but it was quite shut out from sight, and Sheba had only the Chinaman's word for its proximity. She flew on with her usual light and rapid step, startling a kangaroo rat from its hiding place, and awaking the untoward mirth of a laughing jackass.

The thunder of the falling water grew more and more distinct, and the approach to it more and more difficult, but Sheba pushed bravely on through the mass of wild flowers, creepers and wattle that opposed her steps. At last she found herself below what seemed a gigantic rift in the earth, and through this the waters of some great and unknown river were rushing, only to leap over a precipice that faced where she stood, and in one magnificent cascade of seething foam hurled themselves down on the broken rocks below.

For a moment the girl held her breath and stood there awed and amazed. Accustomed as she was to the wild grandeur and scenic marvels of this marvellous land, it seemed to her that nothing so magnificent had ever yet greeted her eyes.

The place was intensely still save for that low thunder roar of the falling water. All the foliage was green and gold and amber tinted; the low rocky hills spread seawards, crowned with trees, and far above gleamed blue depths of sky, and snowy piles of clouds that roofed the valley.

Sheba did not move; she simply stood there gazing at the scene and wondering at that divine freshness and beauty, set like God's seal upon primeval lands, which seem to hallow all spots undesecrated by foot of man.

There are links between nature and humanity which civilization has done its best to destroy; but what breath of purity or inspiration lives in towns worthy to compare with the boundless space, the freedom, air and grandeur of nature's widespread territories where the savage holds his heritage, and the forest creatures roam unharmed?

How long Sheba might have stood there in that rapt and wondering dream, it is hard to say; but something disturbed her at last and made her start almost in terror, so strange and unexpected a sound it was.



From the bushes a little to her right there issued a low faint moan, like some plaint of pain, and the girl, startled, yet faintly curious, moved hurriedly towards the spot.

Not a dozen yards from where she stood, and lying face downwards on the grass, was stretched the figure of a man. At first Sheba thought he must be asleep, but a second moan startled that fancy into something of fear, and she bent over the prostrate form and tried to see the hidden face. Then suddenly her lips paled and she turned cold and sick. There was blood upon the bright hair, so close to her down-bent face, and involuntarily she tried to raise the man's head and turn him on his side. At her touch, and as if recognizing her weak endeavour, he made an effort also, but he groaned involuntarily, and she saw the death-like whiteness of his face turn ashy grey. She laid him gently down and flew to the water and brought some back in her hat with which she sprinkled his face and bathed the wound on his temple. It was not very deep, but it bled profusely, and Sheba, having no knowledge of wounds, grew terribly alarmed at sight of that flowing stream.

It suddenly occurred to her that in books, wounds were always bandaged, so she took out her handkerchief and tried to bind it round the head of the unconscious man. It was far too small to go round it. In despair she tucked up her frock, and seizing her linen petticoat, tore a long strip off it, and first dipping the handkerchief in water laid it on the wound and proceeded to bind it tightly with the strip of soft linen. Just as she had accomplished this, the wounded man opened his eyes. They were full of wonder and almost, she thought, of alarm.

"Are you better?" she asked.

His face grew very white; he made an effort to rise, supporting himself on one elbow.

"Yes," he said; "I am better. Did you—did you find me here?"

"Yes," said Sheba, looking at him with mingled admiration and compassion. "Your head was bleeding dreadfully. Did you fall down the precipice?"

"I—I suppose so," he said; but she noticed that the color flushed his bronzed face and that his eyes flashed wrathfully. "I am better now," he added, as he staggered to his feet and leant against the tall gum tree beside which Sheba had discovered him. He looked at her critically for the first time. "How on earth did you find your way here?" he asked.

"I'm here for a picnic," said Sheba. "The rest of us are over there," and she nodded in the direction of the gully through which she had come.

A look of alarm crossed his face. He glanced searchingly at Sheba. "Will they come here?" he asked. "I—you will think it strange—but I don't wish to be seen by anybody—any strangers——"

"Oh!" said Sheba composedly, "I don't think they will find this place very easily. I had great difficulty myself."

"But won't they come to look for you?" he asked.

"I expect not. They are to 'coo-ee' when dinner is ready. They know I am sure to find my way back."

"You are a brave little girl," he said; "and I owe you a debt of gratitude for coming to my rescue. I wonder you weren't frightened to touch me."

"You did look very bad," said Sheba, "and I hate the sight of blood, but I couldn't see you bleeding to death without doing something to help you."

"I wonder," he said bitterly, "if I should have bled—to death? Probably not. The desired never happens. Well, now I should like to know if you can be trusted to keep a secret? Your sex and your age are against you. What do you say?"

"I know I could," said Sheba, flushing hotly, but looking straight at him with her great sombre eyes.

"May I trust you, then?" he said gently. "Tell none of your party about me, or this accident. I have reasons—strong reasons—for wishing no one to know of it. Will you promise me?"

"Yes," said the girl simply.

She made neither comment nor remonstrance, and the fact surprised him. He had expected a fire of questions and expressions of curiosity. He looked searchingly at her with his deep blue eyes, and she met the gaze unflinchingly.

"I believe you will keep your word," he said.

The colour had faded from his face again, he looked faint and worn.

"Can I do anything more for you?" asked Sheba. "You seem so weak. Have you no friend—no one to take care of you?"

A strangely bitter smile crossed his lips.

"No," he said; "and I want none. I don't believe in—friends."

His eyes glanced round and suddenly darkened with an ominous flash. They had caught sight of something which had escaped Sheba's notice. At the same moment a loud prolonged "coo-ee" came to their ears, and Sheba started involuntarily.

"They are calling me," she said. "I must go. I—I do hope you are better. How do you mean to get out of here?"

"Oh, I am all right," he said, almost eagerly. "I know a friendly

black fellow who has a hut not far off. I can easily walk there. Now you had better be off to your friends or they will be anxious. Stay—what is your name? We are not likely ever to meet again, still I should like to know.”

“My name,” she said slowly, “is Sheba.”

He looked at her a moment. “An uncommon name,” he said. “but I fancy you are an uncommon child. Sheba—I will not forget. Well, good-bye. I hope I don’t seem ungracious, but I don’t wish your party to catch sight of me.”

He held out his hand, and Sheba gave him hers. The blue eyes and the brown eyes met in a long serious gaze. Then he bent and touched her hand with his lips, while the blood flushed in a hot tide to her face at the grave and courteous salute.

“Remember your promise,” he said softly.

She only bent her head. She could not speak—so strange a flood of emotion swept through her heart, and set its pulses leaping to the gravity and importance of a granted trust. Like one in a dream she turned and moved slowly away, and the tall trees shut her out from sight. The man watched until the slight young figure was no longer visible, then his eyes turned again to the dark spot in the grass which had previously attracted his notice and feebly and with effort he moved towards it.

Then he stooped and picked up from the tangled grasses a small shining tube. He looked at the glittering barrel—the discharged chambers, and a dark frown gathered on his brow.

“So it was—her—work,” he muttered. “Well, it only needed this to end everything completely and for ever. I have been a fool, and my folly has almost cost me my life. But, thank God it has cured me. As Heaven hears me, I swear never to love or trust woman from this hour!”

He looked up at the blue sky, canopied with serene indifference this one small space of earth that had witnessed a tragedy of crime. The look in his face was terrible in its white menace and hatred of what he had forsworn. He placed the revolver in his belt, and staggered with feeble and uncertain steps towards the water’s edge.

“Good God!” he groaned. “How shall I ever find strength to get to the hut?”

He bent over the clear rushing stream, and drank eagerly, and laved his face in its cool depths.

The draught seemed to revive him. He lifted his head and shook the bright drops from his hair. Then walking giddily and with effort he disappeared into the dark belt of scrub beyond the valley.

CHAPTER XIV.

"OH—WONDER OF THE SEA!"

THE picnic party were all seated on the grass, on which the cloth had been spread and the various good things laid out, when Sheba last came in sight.

She was panting and breathless—her clean neat frock was wet with the water that had dripped from her hat while she was carrying it to the wounded man, and in her rapid passage through the brush she had stained it against the rough bark of the trees, and the tangled masses of flowers and ferns amidst which she had fallen more than once. Her hat was still wet, and she held it in her hand; her hair, which had come unplaited, streamed about her in wild confusion.

"Good gracious, child!" exclaimed Mrs. Ormatroyd, "where have you been to get into such a state? Why, you're all wet! Have you fallen into a creek?"

"No," said Sheba, "it's only my hat."

She tossed it down as she spoke, and smoothed her hair back from her flushed face. Bessie Saxton laughed outright.

"You do look a sight," she exclaimed. "I thought your tidy wouldn't last long. Did you find your waterfall?"

Sheba grew white and red by turns. All eyes were fixed on her, and she naturally exaggerated the disorder of her appearance. Her self-possession left her. She could not speak; her heart began to beat violently, and tears, which in all cases of strong emotion were dangerously near her eyes, began to threaten an advent.

Then suddenly, with the calming effect of a strong, yet gentle partizanship, a voice reached her, and a hand drew her down to a seat on the soft grass.

"Come, Miss Sheba, don't look so miserable. There's no great harm done after all; your dress will be dry before we've finished dinner, and as for the hair—why, if I were a painter I'd ask for nothing better than to make a picture of you—just as you are."

It was Noel Hill who spoke; it was Noel Hill who drew her to his side, and covered her confusion so kindly. Sheba felt her heart swell with gratitude. She could not speak, but the look in his eyes held an eloquence that needed no verbal interpretation, and the young man as he met her glance thought to himself, "How that passionate, enthusiastic soul will suffer some day!"

"You are quite spoiling her, Mr. Hill," said Mrs. Ormatroyd with maternal sternness; "she is really old enough to give up those tiresome ways. She ought to have remained with Bessie and her sisters, not gone rambling off by herself and making herself into such a figure, too!"

But Noel Hill only laughed, and carved the fowls, and gave Sheba some, and filled her glass with lemonade, quite regardless of Mrs. Ormatroyd's grumbling, or Bessie Saxton's somewhat indignant glances.

That young lady had discovered that to be *un peu coquette* with Noel Hill was a waste of time. She had played off innumerable airs and graces, but with no effect. It annoyed her excessively to see him championing Sheba and neglecting herself. True, she might find consolation in the devotion of Ted Sanderson, who seemed to have entirely forsworn his allegiance to his late sweetheart; but then Ted Sanderson was only a boy, and Noel Hill was a man of at least six-and-twenty; a man with a mind and ideas, and one worthy of captivating, and yet he could fuss about an ugly tiresome little chit like Sheba Ormatroyd. No wonder the young lady's serenity was disturbed.

The meal went on gaily enough. People balanced their plates on their knees, and got the cramp by so doing, and spilt the salt and upset the glasses, and made raids across the extemporized table for bread; and caterpillars crawled over the cloth, and strange insects dropped into the gravy of the pies; and altogether it was as enjoyable and exhilarating as picnics invariably are.

Even Mrs. Ormatroyd grew sociable and almost benevolent under the combined influence of pigeon pie, Bass's ale, and Aunt Allison's proximity.

Mr. Saxton was genial and good-humoured as ever; Mr. Ormatroyd did his best to follow suit; the younger Saxtons and the "boys," to use a comprehensive phrase, were as wild as young colts, and Sheba might have been equally hilarious had it been possible for her to forget her adventure and the promise she had given. But it was not. That pale bronzed face, with its bright hair stained with blood, those grave, deep eyes that had rested so searchingly on hers, haunted her incessantly.

She wondered who the stranger could have been; she felt angry with herself that she had not asked his name. And now he had gone away into those wild bush regions and she might never see him again. Absorbed and silent so she sat there, with the untasted food before her, living over again and yet again those few moments, brief yet momentous, which had linked this unknown life to hers with a memory time could never weaken.

Noel Hill watched her wonderingly. To him Sheba was always an interesting study, and he felt convinced something had happened during her absence, which she was keeping to herself. As he watched her, he saw her put her plate down mechanically and her hand stray to her pocket. It was such a simple and ordinary action that probably he would not have remarked it but for the sudden flush that rose to the girl's face, and the look of disturbance in her eyes as they met his own.

"Mr. Hill," she said hesitatingly, "have you a—a spare handkerchief you could lend me?"

He immediately searched in his pocket. "I don't often have one," he said, "but to-day—yes—here is an extra one. I brought it in case of any accident. Have you lost yours?"

Sheba hesitated. "I—I left it in the bush," she said, growing very pale.

Noel Hill noted the hesitation and the pallor. "I was right," he said. "She has met with some adventure. I wonder if she will tell me about it."

But Sheba only put the handkerchief in her pocket, took up her plate, and finished her meal in total silence.

After dinner Mr. Saxton suggested they should walk to the sea, which John Chinaman confidently asserted could be reached in half-an-hour, and accordingly they all set off. They skirted the scrub by means of a rough foot track which led them by a somewhat steep ascent to the first ridge of hills.

All around them was the dense luxuriance of bush foliage in vivid shades of crimson and green; the glow of berries, the fluttering wings of gorgeous butterflies, the whirr of the locusts as they flitted through the brushwood—things new and strange to Noël Hill and the English girls, but familiar as her daily life to Sheba.

Gradually the soil grew rocky and uneven, the tall gum trees gave place to yellow wattle, and short spiky herbage. The air grew keen and fresh, and as they reached the hill summit, before them lay a lovely land-locked bay, with the sea blue as turquoise, shining in the sunlight, and rolling in grand, majestic billows that broke along the coast in sheets of foam.

A universal exclamation of delight escaped all lips, so lovely was the surprise after the rough walk and somewhat monotonous scenery of the bush.

The buzz and hum of woodland life had ceased. Nothing broke the stillness save that lulling murmur of the waves as they rose and fell on the white firm sands, which seemed to stretch for miles and miles around.

Noel Hill glanced at Sheba's face: she was standing by his side,

her eyes questioning—startled—as the eyes of one who looks on some new glory.

The beauty, and the wonder, and the delight of what she saw held her speechless—for what is new to soul and sense does not lend itself easily to commonplace words; and as she gazed on that boundless, rolling space melting into the blueness of the dim horizon line, she felt an awe of its beauty that seemed to hold her like a spell, and bow her inmost soul in wondering worship.

The boys broke into noisy shouts, and they and the younger Saxtons rushed at headlong speed down the steep hills covered with short and prickly furze, that lay between them and the shore itself.

Their elders followed more sedately, but Sheba still stood there and Noel Hill lingered beside her.

He did not like to disturb her; he knew instinctively what feelings were at work in the childish soul; how the great and thrilling voice of nature was speaking to her in this hour; and he felt it would be almost sacrilege to disturb that rapt and wondering gaze, to call her down from heights his own fancy might not reach, and bid her fashion the dumb and passionate ecstasy of her startled senses into some adjective of praise, such as the others had used.

She lost all count of time, and place, and association.

She had thought the harbour beautiful when she had crossed it once by the ferry steamer; but its fairy islands, and sloping wooded banks, and lines of wharves and stores, seemed commonplace now beside this vast, free, rolling width of waters, kissed by sun and sky—lanned by free, sweet winds—where the sea-birds rocked themselves on the dancing waves, and chance sails of passing ships melted, vision-like, into the golden air.

When at last her trance of wonder was over, she slowly raised both hands, and pressed them to her eyes for a moment. The dropping them, she turned to Noel Hill as if in no way surprised that he should be by her side.

"I was wondering," she said dreamily, "how God must have felt when He first looked on *that*—and knew it was His work! . . ."

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## CHAPTER XV.

### THE ENDING OF THE DAY.

THROUGHOUT the rest of that day Sheba remained in the same dreamy, absorbed state. Nothing roused her—nothing re-





it is just *the* one thing that redeems even an ugly woman. I've heard the men on board ship say so over and over again. They used to say they'd tire of pretty faces very soon, but if a woman had spirit—life—dash—*chic*, in fact, she might hold a man as long as she pleased."

"Oh, indeed," said Noel Hill, "and am I to suppose that some half-dozen men on board ship, represent to your mind the opinions of the English nation at large? The men who come out here are not, as a rule, very creditable specimens. Choice has often less to do with a trip to the colonies than—expediency."

"They were gentlemen," said Bessie, colouring a little at the sarcasm she detected in his voice.

"No doubt," he said smiling. "If you had added 'once' you would probably be more correct. I have known even English 'gentlemen' deteriorate under the influence of bad associates and dissipation. They generally seek a remedy for these evils amidst new scenes, and new lands. The search is more frequent than the discovery. But this conversation is too grave for young people, and I see there is a move up yonder. I suppose we must think of starting homewards at last."

He rose and began to collect the tea-cups and plates, while Mrs. Ormatroyd and Aunt Allison were packing into various hampers and baskets.

"There will be a full moon to-night," he said. "The drive home will be delightful."

It was close on sunset. The clouds in the west glowed like burnished brass. There was a faint breeze stirring the trees. Sheba rose slowly to her feet, and gazed somewhat anxiously in the direction of the waterfall.

She wondered how the stranger had fared—whether he had reached the black man's hut—whether she should ever see him again?

Her secret weighed heavily on her mind. She knew the pain of the bush well enough, and he had seemed so weak and helpless, and perhaps he had miles of that rough, wild region to travel before he could reach shelter.

Well, whether he had done so, or not, she must leave undecided. She had promised to say nothing of her adventure, and she would keep her word.

With a strong effort she threw off her pre-occupation, and endeavoured to help with the "packing up," and to chat and laugh with Bessie and the children.

Shortly before the van was ready, Felix Short came up to her and drew her a little apart from the others.

"I say, Sheba," he whispered, "have you seen how Ted has been going on with the Saxton girl? He's quite thrown you over. You'd better give me a turn now. You owe me something for that book, you know."

"I will return you your book to-morrow," said Sheba with dignity. "And I'm not going to have anything more to say to any of you boys! There! As for sweethearts—I hate the word!"

"Phew-w-w," whistled the boy, as he thrust his hands in his pockets and, stepping a pace or two back, surveyed her with mingled wrath and irony. "Oh, my! Miss Spitfire, don't you just think you can give yourself airs. Hate sweethearts, do you? A likely story! I suppose you think yourself so mighty grand because you've got a grown-up one. Well, I wish you joy of the casting prig, that I do, and——"

He never got to the end of that sentence, for Sheba, suddenly bursting into one of her "rages," lifted her hand and gave him a stinging box on the ears that sent him reeling back. "How dare you!" she cried, panting like a small fury. "You are a rude, ill-mannered, hateful boy! Never attempt to speak to me again!"

She swung round on her heel, perfectly white and trembling with passion. The action brought her face to face with Noel Hill and Bessie Saxton.

"Good gracious, Sheba," exclaimed her friend, "whatever is the matter?"

"Felix was impudent, and I boxed his ears," said Sheba. "Oh," she added passionately, "I wish I was a boy, I'd fight him!"

"Upon my word," faltered Bessie, retreating a step or two, "I had no idea you were such a little fury!"

But Noel Hill laughed outright. "Is that—*chic*, Miss Bessie?" he asked. "At least you must allow it is not conventional."

But Sheba's rage, as usual, dissolved into tears, and she tore off in a blind, unreasoning fashion, and once out of sight, threw herself on the ground sobbing as if her heart would break.

A chorus of "oo-ee's" almost forced her to return, so she crept slowly back and found every one in the van, and had to face a fusillade of reproaches and questions to which she gave no answer. "When a day begins well with me, it is sure to end badly," she thought to herself. "I wonder why it is?"

She crept into a corner near Aunt Allison, and as far as possible from the region of Felix Short's withering glances. She only hoped they would all let her alone, forget her very existence. She felt miserable, tired, and humiliated. The kindest voice could have jarred on her, the tenderest sympathy only distressed.

Fortunately, Mrs. Ormatroyd decided she was in one of her "sulks," so contented herself with scolding at her, and then relapsed into a fatigued and resigned silence, and Noel Hill understood her well enough now to draw attention away from her with all his tact and kindness.

The evening was closing in, the wind seemed full of exhilarating coolness, the sky grew clear and soft, the Southern Cross glittered gem-like above the horizon, while the moon, full and radiant and bright as liquid silver, poured lavish floods of light upon the rough road, and the tall trees, and the far-off shadows of the hills.

Some sense of the beauty, and strangeness, and enchantment of the scene gradually stole upon them all, and hushed the idle chatter and foolish laughter which had jarred on Noel Hill's ears.

It was all new and strange to him, this glory of an Australian night amidst the grandeur and solitude of the bush. The difference between seasons and scenery had never come home to him before as they came home on this night of waning summer, which he could but contrast with the grey skies, and smoky fogs, and cruel chilling winds that were at present the portion of his native land.

"Australia is a favoured place," he said at last.

The remark raised a rapid controversy. Mrs. Ormatroyd dwelt on discomforts and self-denial, failing to see that the force of the one compelled the exercise of the other, and therefore robbed of any pretensions to virtue.

Mr. Ormatroyd found fault with the legislation and the society of Mr. Saxton with the mosquitoes and paucity of railways; Aunt Allison sighed mildly over domestic difficulties, and Bessie abused everything indiscriminately as being altogether "so different from England!"

Sheba kept silence, her face averted with an expression of childish pain. "As if those trifles mattered," she thought herself, "when life is so vast and great and lies all before one."

For Sheba did not know yet how widely different are the conditions of youth to those of mature years, and how Time that changes all things, might one day rend her illusions asunder, till she should wonder, not that they had ever existed, but that they should ever have seemed so *real*, and so full of purpose and hope, to her!

\* \* \* \* \*

In the midst of the controversy she heard Aunt Allison's voice addressing her.

"Why are you so quiet?" she asked. "Has the day tired you?" The girl lifted her face—it was very pale, and the big dark eyes looked intensely mournful.

"It is all so disappointing," she said. "I was thinking how different I felt when I set out this morning."

"That experience," said Miss Saxton gently, "is a very general one, I imagine. We all felt different when we set out. Everything was to come, you know; now it is all over, and has become a memory instead of an anticipation. But," she added, "you seemed to be enjoying yourself—in your way."

"Is my way so very different to the others?" asked Sheba, noting that hesitation in ending the sentence.

"Yes," said Aunt Allison, "quite different. Bessie, you know, enjoys with due regard to her own position as a central figure; she considers her appearance even amidst the wilds of bush scenery. Your mother simply endures under protest. I take my full of pleasure quietly and with serenity; my brother noisily; your father philosophically. You note the difference; but the fact of enjoyment may underlie it in every instance."

Sheba smiled. "And I," she said. "How do I take it?"

"Oh," said Miss Saxton gently, "that is different altogether. If I said anything at all, I should say too deeply—too enthusiastically. I wish," she added after a short pause, "that you were more of a child. Can't you enjoy without going into the why and wherefore of it all?"

"No," said Sheba gravely. "How can I help it? It is just like what I said to mother when she told me I was so ugly, 'I don't make myself. I don't want to be like this,' she added, her voice low and deeply earnest, "but I have got to be—just as I must put up with my sallow skin and ugly features. I would rather be like Bessie if I had the chance, but what use is it to wish for impossibilities?"

"None whatever," said Miss Saxton cheerfully. "So if I were your dear, I wouldn't wish to be like—Bessie."

"She is not fond of me," said Sheba mournfully. "I so hoped she would be, but she is not; she just tolerates me, that is all. I don't understand about dress, or trimmings, or styles, and she thinks me so stupid when I can't remember if her pink gown has more flounces than her white, or the grey is cut with a pointed bodice and the brown with a full one."

"I think," said Aunt Allison smiling, "there are more important things in life to remember than the cut of a bodice, and doubtless Bessie will think so also one day; she likes pretty things and bright colours and she knows they suit her. Now your

passion for books and nature is quite as incomprehensible to her, as her millinery tastes are to you."

Sheba was silent. She was too loyal to say that there was something about Bessie Saxton's moral nature which jarred on her more painfully even than her vanity; something not quite straightforward and honest, that dealt with crooked subtleties and airy sophistries, the like of which Sheba's simple, truthful soul had never conceived.

"I hope," continued Miss Saxton presently, as the voices around them burst into renewed laughter and noisy discussion, "that you will be friends, dissimilar as you are. Girls are the better for girls' society. You would do Bessie good I think, and she—well, she would never harm you. You have the courage of opinions, young as you are."

"Bessie says it is horrid in a girl to have opinions," said Sheba. "They ought to be soft, yielding, impressionable. I don't feel at all like that."

Miss Saxton laughed softly. "Did Bessie say so? Perhaps she finds you too strong-minded for her taste. When she was at school she was always modelling herself on somebody; some friend of the 'term.' The friendship rarely outlived a term. I sometimes hardly recognized her; she would be quite different at Midsummer to what she had been at Christmas. We all used to laugh at her so; then she would be dreadfully offended—poor Bessie."

She sighed softly and glanced at the subject of discussion, who was talking with extreme vivacity to Noel Hill and Ted Sanderson alternately.

"She seems very happy," said Sheba. "I think," she added suddenly, "she likes Mr. Hill."

"She wants to have lessons from him," said Aunt Allison with an odd little smile; "I don't know why; she hates learning as a rule."

"What sort of lessons?" asked Sheba wonderingly; "Latin and mathematics?"

"Oh, no—I don't fancy she would go in for Classics or Euclid. English literature and French. He is a very good French scholar."

"He is wonderfully clever," said Sheba enthusiastically. "And so kind. I never thought I should be fortunate enough to have such a teacher."

The conversation had been carried on in a low tone, under cover of the other voices, but now there came a sudden lull. John Chinaman turned round from his seat by the driver and suggested that as the horses had a steep hill to climb, the gentlemen and children should get out and have "walkee, walkee."

Sheba sprang up impetuously and soon they were all out of the

van, with the exception of Mrs. Ormatroyd, who was too tired to walk, and Miss Saxton, who stayed to keep her company.

Sheba, who was far in advance of the others, found Noel Hill by her side.

"You are evidently not tired," he said, glancing down at the slight agile figure. "Have you enjoyed your day?"

"Yes, and no," said the girl. "It has been different to what I thought. I am sorry," she added with sudden pained humility, "that I lost my temper. But Felix was very rude; he had no right to say what he did, and a boy will never understand you are angry with him unless you box his ears."

"I think," said Noel Hill with a quiet laugh, "that you left Felix Short in no doubt as to *your* feelings. Do you intend to make it up again?"

"No," said Sheba, shaking back her long thick hair with a sudden impatient movement. "I am sick of boys, and I told him I would never have another sweetheart, and I mean to keep my word."

"Perhaps you are right," said Noel Hill. "The office certainly appears to possess disadvantages."

"I will make them all over to Bessie," continued Sheba magnanimously. "Ted Sanderson has deserted me already; the others may follow suit. Oh! Mr. Hill," she added with a sudden change of voice, "I had almost forgotten your handkerchief; may I give it back to you—now?"

"If it will relieve your mind," he said pleasantly. Then, in a lower key and bending a little nearer to her, he said, "Wasn't there a little mystery about—about the other handkerchief, Miss Sheba?"

She started and looked up at him with a pale terrified face. "Oh," she said eagerly, "please don't ask. I—I mustn't tell—and there was no harm—nothing wrong."

"I never suspected that," he said reassuringly. "Only if you wish to avoid further remarks, you had better try and remove those bloodstains from your frock. There are more curious people in the world than I, Miss Sheba."

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### "THE FALL OF THE REAPER'S SCYTHE."

It seemed strange to Noel Hill to think of May as a winter month, but after a long spell of tropical heat and heavy rainfalls

and terrific storms, he found himself acknowledging that it was by far the pleasantest month of the year.

He had become used to his quiet life and its daily round of duties. His health had visibly improved and he told Sheba laughingly that he trusted his case was not to be one of the "usual" ones she had so cheered him by citing as fatal.

His interest in his young pupil only increased as time went on, and his influence over her was extraordinary as well as beneficial. With his teaching on the one hand and Aunt Allison's womanly counsel and tenderness on the other, Sheba could not but improve. The Saxtons had done her good in many ways, but all the devotion of her heart was lavished on Aunt Allison, who was her ideal of all that was perfect in womanhood.

It was growing towards dusk one May evening—the evening of Sheba's fourteenth birthday—and she was sitting on a low stool before the bright wood fire, expecting the arrival of Bessie and her aunt, who were to spend it with her.

She had not seen them for some time, for visits were not so frequent since the weather had been less certain, and as the fire flames played over the rich dark red of her frock—her father's present—she was wondering a little what Bessie would think of it, and if she would say she was a little less ugly in it than in most of her gowns. That had been her mother's verdict when the frock had been put on—her father having had it made up by a Sydney dressmaker, a piece of extravagance which Mrs. Ormatroyd could not bring herself to approve.

The fire flushed her cheeks and played on the rich colour of the dress and the soft tumbled waves of hair which still fell loose about her forehead, and softened the irregular outlines of her face.

On the rug at her feet lay the pretty goat, chewing the cud in a lazy, contented fashion, and occasionally rubbing his head against his young mistress's knee.

Mrs. Ormatroyd was in the kitchen superintending the making of scones, and various other comestibles which were destined for tea, and not to be safely trusted to the skill of the Australian domestic.

It still wanted a quarter of an hour to the time fixed for the Saxtons' arrival, and Sheba was luxuriating in a spell of rest and quietude.

The room looked at its best, though Sheba despaired of ever making it anything like that drawing-room at the Crow's Nest.

She was quite unaware what a picture she made there in the firelight—quite unaware that two eyes, grave, distressed, pain-filled, were contemplating the picture and that their owner shrank

from disturbing it, even while the sternness of necessity made itself heard like an audible voice and told him he had no choice but to do it.

"She has courage," he thought; "she will bear it better than her mother . . . but how hard it seems to break in upon her now."

Suddenly the goat lifted its head and looked towards the door. Sheba turned in the same direction and saw the figure of Noel Hill. She sprang to her feet.

"So you have come after all," she cried eagerly; "and you told me this morning you could not. Come near the fire—won't you? It must be blind man's holiday, for mother said I was not to light the lamp till she came in from the kitchen."

She stirred the fire as she spoke and drew a chair up to it. Noel Hill advanced slowly, and as he came within the light of the blazing logs she saw his face was very pale and troubled.

"What is the matter?" she asked quickly. "Are you ill?"

"No," he said, looking sadly at her. "Oh, no—only I have heard some bad news."

"Ah," said Sheba; "it is mail day. I never like it. If father or mother get letters from England they are always miserable, and if they don't they are always cross. You have had a letter; I can see that—and now you are miserable."

He did not smile as she had expected, and he did not answer her speech except by a question.

"Where is your mother?" he asked, and so grave was his voice, so strange his face, that Sheba felt there must be some weighty cause for anxiety.

"In the kitchen," she said. "I told you so before. Do you wish to see her?"

"No," he said, "not yet. I—I have something to say to you first. Sheba, try and be a brave little girl. I know it is in you, if you make the effort."

She turned very pale, but she looked straight at him.

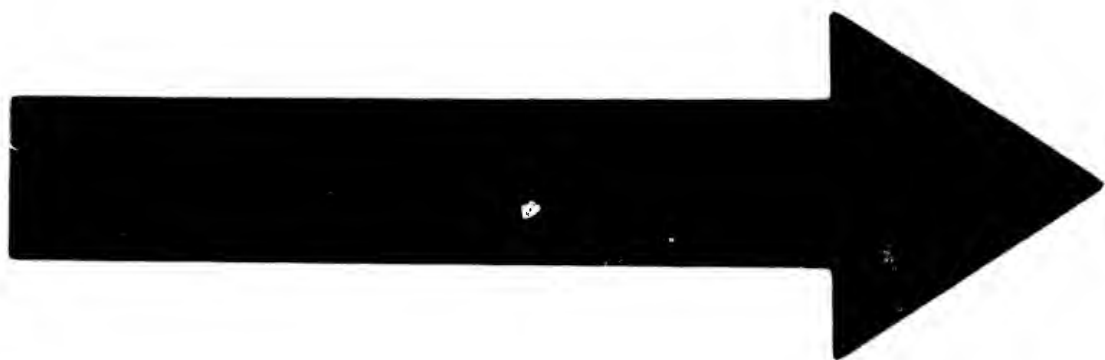
"Please tell me," she said; "it can't be very bad. Mother is all right, and Hex—and father—"

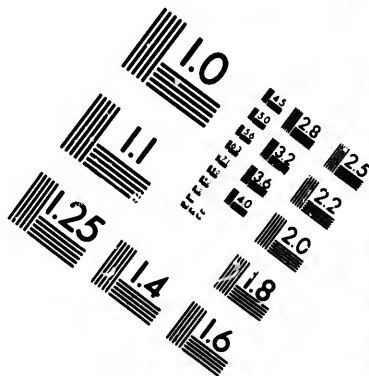
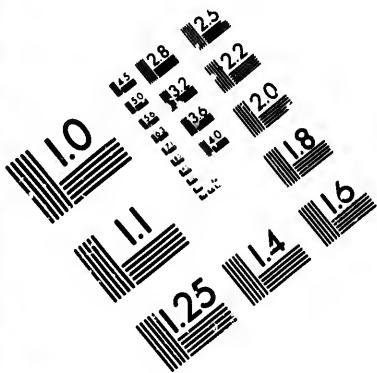
Something in his eyes as she said that word struck to her heart like a pang. Involuntarily her own turned to the pretty frock, then flashed up in terror and dread.

"Is it—father?" she said hoarsely. "Has anything happened—is he—ill?"

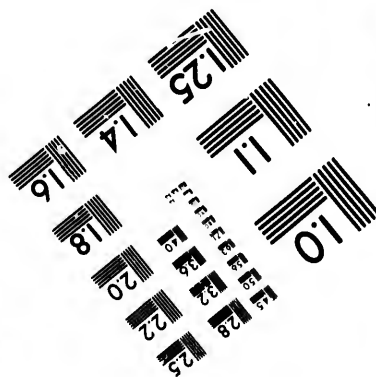
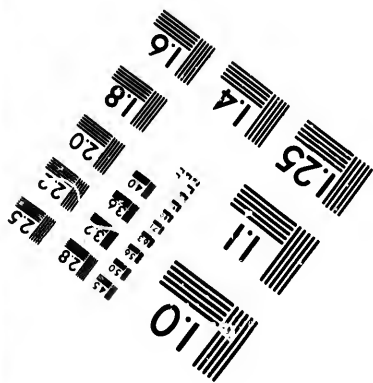
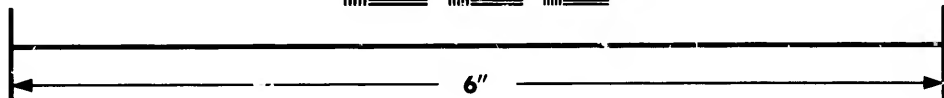
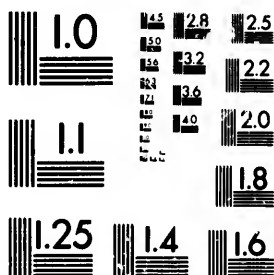
Noel Hill took her hands in both his own. "Poor child," he said tenderly. "Poor little Sheba—it is your first real grief. But for your mother's sake—for Hex, who is so young—try to bear it. Your father died this morning quite suddenly. They are bringing







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him home. I only heard it at the ferry and hurried here—to prepare you. Oh, my poor child—what can I do for you?"

She had swayed towards the low wooden mantelshelf, and supported herself against it while her eyes rested wide and horror-filled on his pitying face.

"*Dead,*" she faltered. "I—I can't believe it. People don't die like that—so suddenly. They are ill a long, long time. He—why only this morning he kissed me. It was my birthday, you know—and look, he gave me this," and she pointed to her frock. "He said I was growing up now and it was time I looked like a young lady—and I have put it on to show him, and do you mean to say he will never *see* it after all—never speak to me as he spoke this morning? Oh! it can't be true!"

"Hus's," said Noel Hill, holding up his hand warningly. "Didn't you hear the gate? Oh, Sheba, your mother—think of your mother. Who is to tell her?"

She drew herself up, cold, rigid, white. She looked at him now without appeal. There was something almost tragic in the repressed grief of her face—the passionate terror of her eyes.

"Then—it *is* true," she whispered. "It is *death*—that they are bringing—death."

"Yes," he said compassionately. "There was no time to warn—to prepare."

"It would have been the same," she said, "the same—whatever the warning. Must I—tell mother?"

"Have you the courage?" he asked, wondering that she had shed no tear, but knowing full well how deep and terrible a thing suppressed grief might be, as he met those tragic eyes from which no childish soul would ever look out again.

She bent her head for a moment on the low wooden shelf. One dry choking sob escaped her lips. Then, with a supreme effort, she lifted her face and shook back the cloud of dusky hair.

"I think I have—courage," she said slowly. "But she will say I cannot feel."

Noel Hill knew that was more than probable, but he felt it was better the news should come from Sheba than from himself. He led her to the door. The sound of approaching wheels, the click of the gate, made her shudder convulsively.

Death to her was as yet an unknown terror, but she felt that what was now being borne across the threshold could not be and never had been her father. The sound of the feet made her turn sick and cold. Her first impulse was to rush wildly into the kitchen and cry out the horror of her news, but something

stronger than impulse had sprung up to life within her heart, and held her in its stern compelling grasp.

She crossed the passage and opened the back door, the cold air struck keen and chill on her face as she moved mechanically across the yard to where the lights of the kitchen were streaming out in a warm bright glow through the open door.

She went in and stood for a moment looking at the pile of fragrant cakes, and crisp brown scones, and at Mrs. Ormatroyd's fair comely face all flushed with exertion and conscious pride.

"Now, Sheba child, what brings you here? Have the Saxtons come?"

"Mother," said the girl gently, "come with me, please. Mr. Hill is in the drawing-room. He—he wants to speak to you."

"Oh, I can't be bothered just now," snapped Mrs. Ormatroyd. "It can't be anything important."

"You must come," said Sheba decidedly. "Father . . . he has come to tell you . . . that father was taken suddenly ill . . . and . . ."

"Ill!" Mrs. Ormatroyd turned round sharply. "What a nuisance—and to-night too, just as I am so busy. That is so like a man!"

Sheba recoiled involuntarily. "He could not help it," she said. "Won't you come? I am afraid it is very serious."

Mrs. Ormatroyd whisked the last scone out of the oven, snatched off her apron and wiped her hands, grumbling audibly all the time, and looking indignantly at her daughter as if she had been instrumental in bringing about this catastrophe.

Five minutes later she was in raging hysterics beside the body of her dead husband.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

### GATHERING CLOUDS.

"AND his salary dies with him," cried Mrs. Ormatroyd. "And he never would insure his life. We are all ruined!"

It was the morning after that terrible night. A night destined to mark an epoch in Sheba's life and make her shudder at the very name of "birthday" from that time forward. Her mother had passed from one fit of hysterics into another, and it had needed all the girl's self-command to bear with the scene. Aunt Alliscn had remained all night, having sent Bessie home under the care of Noel Hill; but Mrs. Ormatroyd had persisted in clinging

to Sheba in her intervals of consciousness, and the poor child had not dared to stir from the room.

It was early days for so sad an experience. Early days to feel that all her past life was slipping from her grasp into a dim and shadowy background, and Mrs. Ormatroyd's first conscious words served but to seal her daughter's forebodings.

"Ruined!" Sheba wondered what would become of them now. They had never had more than just sufficient to make "both ends meet;" never known a superfluous luxury, or for the matter of that anything deserving the name of "luxury" at all. But if even the small means they had were to end with this calamity, what would become of them?

Little as she knew of the practical side of life, she felt that money must be had to carry on any sort of existence, and here was her mother deciding that they had absolutely none.

She sat there in mute wretchedness listening to these wails and lamentations—listening too to Aunt Allison's calm and cheering voice, and wondering how she could talk of comfort as even possible.

"Everything must be sold," wailed Mrs. Ormatroyd with dreary reiteration. "Everything—my jewellery. . . . my diamonds, poor mamma's gifts. . . . Oh, what would she say if she could see me now?"

"But she's dead," said Sheba brusquely. "So of course she doesn't know anything about it."

"Yes, she is dead," moaned Mrs. Ormatroyd. "Ah, well indeed that Heaven has taken her before ever she could see this dry, and her daughter brought to ruin, and left desolate in a foreign land!"

She burst into fresh weeping, and Sheba rose half-impatiently and went over to the window and threw back the shutters to let some light and air into the darkened room.

"What are you doing?" screamed her mother. "You hear less, forgetful girl! How can you let the light in, and a death in the house! Close the shutters directly."

Sheba looked round somewhat bewildered. "Do you mean to say," she exclaimed, "that because poor papa is dead—we are to keep all the rooms in darkness?"

"Certainly," said Mrs. Ormatroyd, sitting up in bed, and putting her handkerchief to her eyes to shut out the sacrilegious light that dared to intrude on the self-inflicted gloom of grief. "Do you suppose that because I have been buried alive all these years in an uncivilized land like this, that I have forgotten the decencies of civilized life? No, thank God. Trying as my lot has been, and will be, I can never forget how I was brought up!"

"Well," said Sheba brusquely, as she closed the shutters, "I have not been 'brought up' among dead bodies, so I don't know what they consider etiquette."

"You are an unfeeling, worthless girl!" cried Mrs. Ormatroyd, dropping her handkerchief. "I don't believe you have shed one single tear for your poor father! And look at you in that flaring scarlet dress. You might really have had the decency to change it after what has happened."

"She has not had time," interposed Aunt Allison gently. "She has never left this room all night."

"Well—she may go now," said Mrs. Ormatroyd pettishly. "And when you have changed your frock," she added, "you can make me some tea. Perhaps it will revive me."

Sheba left the room in a stony quiet way. It was quite true she had not shed a tear. She felt too cold and numbed; the suddenness and horror of grief had paralyzed the easy channel of tears, and seemed to hold her in a chill and icy grasp from which she could not free herself.

She went straight to the room where they had laid her father. She had not yet found courage to look on the face that had seemed so kind and hearty only one short day before. She had no conception of death, yet she felt an awe and terror of what it would be like, and she hesitated for long beside the narrow bed where that sheeted form lay outlined, in a stillness the like of which she had never beheld, or even imagined.

When she lifted the white covering at last and looked on the quiet face, her heart seemed to stand still. She was not afraid—but the mystery and strangeness of that marble brow, those closed eyes and mute pale lips, touched her with such awe that she lost herself in depth of wonderment. "Where is he now?" she thought. "This is not—father . . . I never saw him look like that! Can he see me, I wonder? Does he look down and know that this was once—himself? That those lips kissed me but yesterday . . . Oh, father . . . father, I was not half fond enough of you when you were here . . . not half good enough—and now—"

She threw herself down and the tears rushed to her eyes. "Now," she sobbed passionately, "I can never reach you . . . never tell you I am sorry . . . never sit on your knee, or feel your arms round me. Oh, death is cruel . . . cruel! How do I know I shall ever see you . . . How am I to find you, if—even I go where you are! And it won't be the same! If you are an angel I shall feel afraid of you . . . I could not be your own little girl like I was—here . . ."

She sobbed so bitterly that she soon grew exhausted; and finally she sank down on the floor with her head leaning against the bed and there fell into a deep sleep.

Mrs. Ormatroyd grew tired of waiting for her tea, and Aunt Allison went to look for Sheba. She had not the heart to disturb the poor child, so made the tea herself and took it to the bereaved widow, who expatiated on its delay as another proof of Sheba's heartlessness.

"Whatever is to become of that child?" she moaned. "As if my trial was not heavy enough without such a daughter. Hex is my only comfort. He has not given me an hour's anxiety—but Sheba——"

"At all events Hex went to bed comfortably last night," said Aunt Allison dryly, "and took good care to have his breakfast this morning. Sheba never left your side. Nor has she tasted food since midday yesterday. You can scarcely wonder she is exhausted now."

"I hope," said Mrs. Ormatroyd, whose ideas were always consistent, "that she has changed her frock. Don't let her come near me again in that glaring scarlet thing! I said it was a waste of money when her father bought it, and my words have proved true . . . of course it must be put away now . . . and she must be in mourning for a year. I think it is a year for a parent, is it not? . . . Yes, I wore black a year for poor dear mamma—I remember quite well. And it was summer too, and oh, the heat of that crape! But I have never flinched from duty—never . . . Oh—if poor Sheba had only taken after me . . . and as I was saying that dress will have to be put away for a year . . . and by then I suppose she will have grown out of it. What a pity it was made up."

Allison Saxton turned away and set down her empty cup on the tray.

"Poor Sheba," she thought, "I pity her from the bottom of my heart."

\* \* \* \* \*

It is strange what a morbid pleasure some people take in making death even more dreary than it naturally is.

Sheba felt instinctively that anger ought to have no place in her heart at such a time, but she could not always "command her soul in patience" when Mrs. Ormatroyd posed as a suffering martyr, and oscillated between fits of hysterics and useless reproaches at the dead man's inconsiderate behaviour.

The fact of his loss seemed to the girl to dwarf into mere insignificance the value of furniture, and china, and jewellery.



Mrs. Ormatroyd persisted that everything must be sold and that she would have to work henceforth to support her children, for which purpose she made as many vague plans as there were hours in the day. She would be a governess—a teacher of music—a working housekeeper—a domestic servant—the keeper of a school—the superintendent of a hospital, and so on—each scheme as it occurred to her being eagerly discussed and then found impracticable.

She seemed to resent the fact of her husband's death as severely as if he had voluntarily chosen the time and place of his decease, and though she would weep floods of tears every time his name was mentioned, she never lost sight of the fact that *she* was the chief sufferer, and expected to be considered as such.

Hex and Sheba took counsel together over matters and wondered whether it would not be possible for them to earn their own livelihood and thereby release the disconsolate widow from at least one burden. But when they hinted at such a thing they only opened fresh floodgates of tears, and were alternately scolded and caressed as "poor dear ignorant children" who knew nothing of the world, or what life and its duties really meant.

But those dreary days came to an end, and Mr. Ormatroyd was buried in the quiet little churchyard that Sheba had often wandered through, with such curiosity and conjecture.

The widow did not attend. She remained shut up in her darkened room with the Bible, Thomas à Kempis, and a bottle of sal volatile as companions.

Miss Saxton came up in the afternoon and wanted to take Sheba back with her to the Crow's Nest, but Mrs. Ormatroyd was so scandalized at the suggestion that it had to be dropped. The etiquette of mourning had to be observed even in the wilds of the bush, and Sheba was condemned to sit by her mother's side and read Thomas à Kempis at intervals during the afternoon by way of paying proper respect to her father's memory; while Billy bleated mournfully in the yard for his young mistress in the irreverent fashion of ignorance that fails to comprehend or excuse any departure from the ordinary routine of life.

If it had not been for Aunt Allison, Sheba would have been indeed miserable, but she stayed on till the evening, when Mr. Saxton arrived. He had not yet seen Mrs. Ormatroyd and he felt that something must really be decided as to her and her children's future.

A small portion of Mr. Ormatroyd's salary had been due at the time of his decease, and this was at once paid over by the firm. Mr. Saxton had, however, to explain that even with extreme

economy this could not keep them for a longer period than three months, and then to stem the torrent of Mrs. Ormatroyd's tearful lamentations, and present to her a way out of her present difficulty.

The head of the firm of merchants in whose employment Mrs. Ormatroyd had been for the last three years, was a widower with an only daughter, a child of four or five years. He was in need of a lady who would undertake the superintendence of his household and see that his daughter was not quite at the mercy of servants—such specimens as find their way to the Australian colonies being indeed a class altogether impossible to describe with anything like poetic justice.

He offered a salary of £100 a year, and had asked Mr. Saxton to propose the matter to the widow of his deceased clerk before advertising for any one else in the papers.

"Do not decide too hastily," said Mr. Saxton in conclusion. "You will have a comfortable home and be able to pay for her schooling and clothes. As for Sheba she must come to us for a year or two until we see how matters go. Expense! Phoo! She doesn't eat more than a bird, and as for her dresses it will be hard if we can't manage to supply them out of Bessie's superfluous wardrobe. Mr. Payne will take Hex to board with him—he can spare £50 out of your salary for his food, clothes and education, I suppose. Now what do you say to the offer?"

It can scarcely be supposed that Mrs. Ormatroyd was the kind of woman to adopt suggestions, however reasonable, without putting forth objections. She invented these with a facility which Mr. Saxton had really not given her credit. As fast as one was combated, another took its place. Sheba, who had to be there passive and mute, felt that there could be limits to patience, and that Mr. Saxton might well be excused for telling her more bluntly that if she had nothing on her own side to suggest, it would be as well for her to cease opposing what was a really feasible and kindly meant way out of her present difficulties.

This being an unanswerable argument it was received with a shower of tears, which made the kind-hearted Englishman feel he had been brutal. He therefore took an abrupt leave, murmuring apologies and condolences with more zeal than coherence, and whispering to Sheba to do her best to persuade her mother to think well over the matter for her children's sake, if not for her own.

The girl looked at him somewhat hopelessly. She wondered in a vague and helpless way whether he really thought she, like any other mortal, could persuade her mother to do anything which did not suit her own inclinations, and yet be cited as an incontrovertible proof of marvellous unselfishness.

Of course by the next morning Mrs. Ormatroyd had decided to accept the £100 pounds a year, and to pose as a martyr on the strength of it.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"ONE HAPPY YEAR."

"Out of evil comes good," thought Sheba as she found herself at last established at the Crow's Nest with all her treasured belongings. Billy was here, and her pet cat, and Vic, her own ugly little rough terrier. The fowls and pigeons had been sold, so had the furniture, pictures and plate; but Sheba had kept possession of her cherished books and cared very little for the loss of the "household gods" over which Mrs. Ormatroyd had shed such bitter tears.

It seemed strange to the girl to contemplate the altered circumstances of her life—to think that she was now an inmate of the house which had so often excited her envy—to hear Aunt Allison's kindly welcome and the girls' rapture and Mr. Saxton's cheerful greeting—to be kissed, and caressed, and made much of—to be led into the cool, pretty chamber which the girls' loving hands had decorated for her—and on all sides to receive a sister's welcome. Mr. Saxton had even arranged that Hex should come over every Saturday and stay till Monday, so that there was absolute a vista of unclouded happiness opening before the girl's eyes, and calling up a mist of grateful tears as she sat in the pretty sitting-room among that kindly group and heard the plans made for her comfort and her pleasure.

It was—to Sheba—such an altogether novel sensation to be considered in any way, or form, that she was almost bewildered by so much attention.

Not only as she had felt her sorrow, bitterly as she still regretted the kindly, if somewhat careless, father, for whom life was now an endless tale, she was too young not to shake off the weight and clog of heavy grief, under the influence of brightness, and the novelty of kind and cheerful society.

The sorrows of childhood are intense while they last, but, thank God, they do not last. Stormy and dark and passionate as the moon on an April sky—like the clouds they are soon dispelled to do anything but shine, by the imperative need for joy and light and happiness, which takes so little to supply, so much to quench.

Sheba had the prospects of a happy year before her. Noel Hill

would still teach her. In the winter she was to walk to the Parsonage twice a week; the other days he would come to the Cross Nest. Mr. Saxton had decided that Bessie would also benefit better of some instruction at his hands, and the two girls were to carry on their studies together.

It seemed to Sheba as if nothing was wanting to complete her happiness. Naturally she ought to have felt sorrow and regret for her mother's absence; but Mrs. Ormatroyd had always treated her as a "thorn in the flesh," and it was scarcely to be expected that the girl should feel regretful at the absence of eternal scoldings, worryings, and fault-finding. Besides Mr. Saxton had assured her that her mother's situation was rather enviable than otherwise. The gentleman to whom she had given her valuable services was one of the magnates of Sydney, and she would live in comparative luxury and ease—and could always console herself with a grievance—if she deemed it necessary—by dwelling on the deprivation of her children's society.

"I think," said Mr. Saxton with a twinkle in his eye, "that your mother really likes a grievance. Some women do."

Sheba drank her tea and pondered the matter over in her heart but did not commit herself to the actual disrespect of an opinion on her mother's character. Quiet as she was to-night, her feelings were strung to an unusually high tension. She was thinking how hard she would study—how eagerly she would learn—how steadily she would try to fit herself for some career of independence. She had never, even by a thought, dishonoured the Saxtons' kindly and heartily given hospitality by calling it "charity." Mrs. Ormatroyd had done so, but Sheba took it for what it was, and in her full and passionate gratitude she felt that nothing could ever repay it.

She wondered why they were so good to her and so fond of her, and the wonder made her heart glow and her eyes brimmed with tears; but she felt too thoroughly convinced both of their goodness and the affection to attribute them to pity for her forlorn situation.

She had soon discovered that the home life at the Saxtons' was very different thing to what her own had been, and that the Allison was its very core and centre.

No one was checked or repressed—never was a harsh word uttered. Innocent and spontaneous as the children's thoughts, were the mirth that enlivened, and the love that brightened their days. Fun, mischief, gaiety—the natural outcome of freedom and light-heartedness—were entered into by their elders and encouraged by them as much as possible. To Sheba it was all B

and delightful, and she only wondered why Bessie would persist in keeping up her lady-like airs and affectations in the face of so much that was simple and pleasant and natural. Yet she was very fond of Bessie, and had never conquered that idea that she was to be the friend of her heart. She felt there was good in the girl beneath that veneer of selfishness and affectation, and for those defects she blamed her school life and companions more than the girl herself. If anything would knock them out of her it would be this unconventional, free and easy life here in the bush, as Mrs. Ormatroyd designated their surroundings.

Bessie seemed fond of Sheba also in a protective, patronizing sort of way, but she would have preferred a more yielding character and one more in sympathy with her own latitudinarian ideas of life. Still as the winter passed quietly on, she found that Sheba's companionship was becoming almost a necessity to her, for the difference in years between the two girls was more than bridged by the mental precocity of the younger.

With that first shock of grief, that first insight into the real sorrows of life, Sheba had put all things of childhood away from her for ever. She had felt the heavy hand of misfortune, and she could never again forget its touch, or look out on the sunshine without a pang of remembered cares. In after years, when she looked back at this turning point of her life, she wondered to herself what it really would have meant for her but for the kindness of the Saxtons, and specially the influence and charm of Aunt Allison's companionship.

It was not a thing to be defined, neither could the girl have described it; but she felt its effect, and its benefit too, long, long after their life paths had diverged, and a dark and bitter struggle had wrung their hearts and tested their affection.

It was no wonder if under such totally different auspices, Sheba's nature expanded both mentally and physically.

Her aptitude for learning was something wonderful, and she astonished Noel Hill by avowing a preference for really useful and necessary subjects—by attending strictly to penmanship itself as well as to what it conveyed—by studying history, grammar, geography and such like useful branches of learning, as well as the Latin and Greek and composition she loved so dearly.

In the career she had marked out for herself, she knew she could not afford to dispense with these necessary, if uninteresting studies, and Noel Hill could not but admire the stern and uncompromising fashion in which she set to work to master them thoroughly.

Bessie was a very *dilettante* sort of student, and more bent upon

impressing her personal charms upon her teacher than attending to his instructions. How he could continue deaf and blind to them was a marvel to her, and occasionally put her into a very bad temper. At such times he simply ignored her. She was too old for reprimands or punishments, so he left her to overcome her petulant folly as she pleased.

Sheba, on the other hand, was keenly—almost too keenly—alive to praise or blame. She had been so long repressed, so long accustomed to her mother's depreciation and her father's good-humoured indifference, that now she found her capacities recognized and her abilities acknowledged, she could scarcely believe herself the same snubbed, derided and cross-grained Sheba of a year ago.

The reaction was natural enough. Miss Saxton had expected it and indeed urged her brother to interfere on the poor child's behalf. She had recognized the fine qualities in her character and seen very clearly that they would be either stunted or trained in direct opposition to their natural bent if she was left to her mother's system of education and discipline, and as time went on and Sheba grew both mentally and physically strong, gentle, and clear-sighted, she congratulated herself on the change, for she was as fond of the girl as of her own nieces.

Of any other world than the world she had read of in books Sheba was as ignorant as a child, and when Allison Saxton spoke to her of trial, of temptation, of the conflict to be waged between duty and inclination, she but vaguely understood these terms in their relative application to the serious side of life.

Her soul had been made up of longings and desires, but a year of peace and love and tender influences had lulled it into a satisfied quiescence. She dimly fancied that such quiescence would content her always, that those troublesome passions and cravings had been dismissed just as her boyish sweethearts had been dismissed; that the one would trouble her as little as the other henceforward, that she had found her work in life and would only have to execute it, leaving out of the question its difficulty, or results.

But Allison Saxton knew better. The soul that looked out of those deep, unchildish eyes was no common soul, and often she found herself speculating as to the girl's future, and what that common fate of womanhood which would make or mar her life.

It had gone near to mar her own, and that sweet face and brow of hers masked a very sad and sorely-trying heart, and the memory of her own girlhood that gave her so deep an

into Sheba's, the thought of her own sufferings that made her so pitiful and tender to the youth around her.

She said something of this once to Mr. Saxton when they were discussing the girl, and her changed appearance and character.

"Phooh!" he said, "she will be all right. She's not pretty enough for men to spoil her with too much attention, and if she ever cares for one, he is sure to be some rusty old bookworm who will charm her with his stores of erudition."

Aunt Allison laughed. "You don't understand Sheba," she said. "She has a poet's fervent romantic heart, and life won't be easy for her, I feel sure. The very knowledge of her own lack of physical charms will make it harder. Not all the intellect in the world will satisfy the cravings of a woman's heart, or alter her nature. Sheba's nature is one to take things far too seriously."

"You are fond of the girl?" questioned Mr. Saxton suddenly.

"Very. There is so much character in her. I am constantly speculating as to what her life will be."

"Oh," said Mr. Saxton lightly, "those young things aren't worth speculating about. She is happy enough now, why shouldn't she remain so?"

"Why?"—Miss Saxton smiled sadly. "Dear Joseph, does life ever stand still, unless one absolutely stagnates? Sheba will never do that."

"Does she ever speak to you about leaving us?" he asked.

"Yes, now and then. She wants to go to Sydney to be a governess, and support her mother and herself independently. That is why she studies so hard; in two years' time she thinks she will be quite prepared. She has been with us nearly one, you know."

Mr. Saxton laughed. "Phooh," he said. "What nonsense. Why she's only a child now. As for her mother, I'm not at all sure, Allison, that the charming widow is not contemplating a new matrimonial venture. The last time I was at Levison's place I thought he was very devoted. Of course Mrs. Ormatroyd will all the change 'sacrificial,' and only make it for the sake of her children; but all the same she will make it, or I am very much mistaken."

Miss Saxton's fair sweet face coloured softly. "Oh," she said, "I hope she won't. It doesn't seem right or decent for a woman to have two husbands, especially when she has children."

"My dear," said her brother, "your views on the matter are somewhat obsolete. I shouldn't advise you to confide them to Mrs. Ormatroyd."

"I don't like her well enough to confide in her," said Allison Saxton warmly. "She has always seemed to me an intensely selfish woman with an inordinate amount of vanity. Everything she does, or ever has done, is perfection in her own eyes, and no one ought to attempt to think the contrary. The way Sheba was brought up, was enough to ruin any girl's disposition."

"I wonder," said Mr. Saxton, as he bade his sister good-night, "what she will say to a step-father."

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Meanwhile Sheba, in happy ignorance of the honour in store for her, lived her own quiet, studious life.

The year was nearly over and during that year her mother had never once been to see her, or asked her to Sydney for even a day. She wrote to her now and then, but as in her letters she still kept up her favourite rôle of martyr, she was not specially anxious that her daughter should be a witness of her lazy luxurious life, or the comforts and attentions that Mr. Levison lavished upon her.

He often told her to ask Sheba over to the pretty villa of which she was ostensibly mistress, but Mrs. Ormatroyd assured him that the girl preferred her wild bush home, and her young companions to an old and careworn mother.

The contrast between her words and her fair, plump person, somewhat tickled her employer, though he was not chary of the compliments expected.

The New South Wales capital of five-and-twenty years ago did not boast of very much society, nor had it been favoured by royal visits and society notables. Everything was dear, though money was plentiful and lavishly spent. Sydney did not boast of palatial buildings and fine streets, and the magnificent public gardens of to-day had chiefly nature to thank for their beauty, though she had done so much that art seemed loth to intermeddle.

No situation could possess more exquisite charms than that lovely bay, opening out from between the two great natural headlands which shut it in from the ocean beyond, and spreading wide, and blue, and clear to the city itself. Tiny islands dot its surface; large vessels lie at anchor in perfect security; no unsightly mudbanks disfigure the magnificent harbour, and the reefs cliffs stand out in irregular masses, while around and beyond tower vast forests of pine and eucalyptus spreading upwards to that far-off blue range, which shuts in the land side of the capital.



One of the great charms of Port Jackson is that the land looks so beautiful from the bay, and the bay so beautiful from the land. The somewhat sad thought that the promising town has its foundations laid in a penal settlement, and half a century ago was peopled almost exclusively by criminals or rough diggers going to and fro to the goldfields, is lost sight of now, when the eye of the tourist, or the gaze of the curious visitor take in the surrounding beauty, developed and utilized by all the magic powers of wealth, taste and enterprise.

Mr. Levison was a great believer in the future of New South Wales. He had hopes of getting into Parliament in a few years' time, and used to confide these aspirations to Mrs. Ormatroyd, who in her turn told him as much as she could remember about England and society—things only known to him by name, as his parents had brought him to the colonies when he was a mere boy—and things which he delighted to hear about from a credible source. It may be surmised, therefore, that Mrs. Ormatroyd's lines had fallen in pleasant places, and she herself was startled to find one morning that a year had passed since she came to Sydney; that the winter season heralded festivities and gaieties which she might now participate in with a clear conscience, and that a handsome cheque from Mr. Levison lay before her as a present for all her kindly care and attention to himself and his little daughter, and was tempting her to sally forth on a shopping expedition to George Street, in order to purchase some of those delicate grey and lavender fabrics which she had so long coveted, and with which her conscience assured her she might now really lighten her mourning.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

### FICTION AND REALITY.

"MR. HILL," said Sheba one morning when she had walked over to the Parsonage for her lessons, "I thought you only came to Australia for a year."

The young man looked up from the volume of Pindar before

"Yes," he said, "that was the least possible time fixed; no less, but as much more as I liked. You see, Miss Sheba, your prophecy about my health has signally failed. I have benefited so much in every way by the change of climate, that I feel in no hurry to return to fogs and frosts, and east winds."

"I am glad," she said simply; "I should feel very lonely without you."

"Without the lessons, I suppose you mean? You are a very enthusiastic pupil. I wish you could infuse some of your ardour into your brother."

"Doesn't he get on?" asked Sheba as she took her accustomed seat. "He ought to work hard. He will have to make his own way in the world. We must both work for mother. I can't bear to think of her slaving her life away for us! Oh, I do so long for the day when I can tell her she must rest, and I will work."

Mr. Saxton told me the other day he knew a governess in Sydney who had £150 a year. She was at Government House. Fancy £150! wouldn't it be splendid?"

"But," said Noel Hill, "you are far too young to get such a salary at first, and you would have to teach modern languages. Now you know very well your French is far behind your Greek and Latin in proficiency, and German you won't learn at all!"

"It is so rough and ugly," pouted Sheba, "and French sounds so silly. I can't imagine a whole nation speaking it." Noel Hill laughed outright. "They do, I assure you, and it is the most useful of all languages. You can travel anywhere and make yourself understood, if you know French."

"But I shall never be likely to travel. I expect I am a fixture here."

"You cannot tell," he said, "and it is always best to be prepared."

"Well," said Sheba with a deep sigh, "put the Greek book away and let us go on with the French dialogues. I wish they would write some sense. Let me see: 'of the weather,' 'of a promenade,' 'of a morning call,' 'of shopping.' Oh dear me, people really talk such idiotic rubbish in France?"

"Come, come," said her master laughing, "you mustn't criticize: you must learn."

Sheba said no more. It was quite enough to be told French was necessary to her scheme for independence in future, to make her study it conscientiously. It was distasteful and she disliked it, but all the same she sternly set herself to conquer its idioms, and to twist her tongue round its glib, accented phrases. She objected to an honest, straightforward man's mode of expression; but if that was his idea of saying "Is the weather cold?" or, "The sister of his aunt had a finer garden than the brother of his cousin?" well, she needs submit—under protest.

When the three hours were over and the books put away she turned eagerly to Noel Hill.

"And how long," she asked, "do you really think you will stay here?"

"At least another year," he said; "and perhaps after that I may try for a curacy in Sydney."

"Another year," said Sheba thoughtfully; "I shall be sixteen. Quite old enough to work. Why," she added suddenly, as she looked at him with those large deep eyes, "I may be in Sydney too."

"That," he said, "would be very delightful. I confess to feeling curious as to how you will work out that future of independence on which you so fondly dwell."

"You may laugh," said Sheba, "as much as you please, but I am very determined; and as I look so much older than I am, there will be no difficulty in getting a situation."

"Please," said Noel Hill, "don't talk of it as a housemaid would. Call it an engagement."

She laughed. "Oh, what signifies a word?" she said. "I am not too particular and you have taught me to have no prejudices."

"Tried to teach you," he said; "I don't think I have succeeded."

"I am very troublesome, I know," the girl said gravely. "You know mother always called me 'a trial.' I feel so much for me and yet I can't do it. I make such good resolutions and yet—I am always forgetting them. Oh dear. . . . What an effort life is."

"You have just described it," said Noel Hill gravely. "It is an effort; and an effort more or less severe according to our natures."

"Well," said Sheba, as she put on her hat and took up her books, "there's no use in worrying about what *may* be. I used to do it once; but I am getting wiser. I mean to take life just as it comes and not expect too much from it."

"You are too young for such philosophical doctrines," said Noel Hill. "Now I must really send you off. I have two pupils coming, and they are due now. I thought Hex would have been here to walk back with you."

"It doesn't matter," said Sheba as she shook hands, "I like my own company now and then, and I don't get much of it at the Crow's Nest."

She walked slowly away, her books under her arm.

Very soon she came to the old house and stopped, as she often did, and leant on the gate to look sadly and regretfully at the deserted garden.

No one had yet taken it, and already the place had that desolate and neglected aspect which even a short period of unoccupation gives to a house.

The oleander trees were bare, the shrubs and bushes and fruit trees looked gaunt and leafless under the bright wintry sky. Sheba sighed as she looked at them and thought of the summer days that were dead and gone. What a long, long time ago it seemed since she had sat in that verandah, and read her books and written her sermons. What a long, long time since she had hidden herself in the "wilderness," and the boys had discovered her through the broken palings.

As she thought of it a mist rose before her eyes. It all looked so far away, though she was conscious that the change lay only in herself. She raised her hand to brush away the foolish tears, and as she did so some one near her touched her arm and said:

"It is you, Sheba; I thought so."

The girl started and looked up. It was Ted Sanderson. "How you startled me!" she said. "What a long time it is since I have seen you. When did you come back?"

"Two days ago," said the boy. "I can't say I like the place or the life. However, my father says it is a good chance for me, and my uncle has one of the biggest stations in——"

"You have been there six months, haven't you?" interrupted Sheba.

"Yes. I suppose you are wondering what has brought me back."

"Perhaps," said the girl with a faint smile, "you wanted to see—Bessie!"

He coloured. "Oh, no," he said, "that's all over. She wouldn't have anything to say to me. I'm too young; and you see I've no prospects. It's not likely a girl like herself would ever marry a squatter."

"Did you actually contemplate marrying her?" asked Sheba. "She must have laughed."

"Yes, she did. But I've quite got over that. I'm not going to bother my head about girls any more."

"Well," said Sheba, "I think you are wise, unless you can confound fine your affections to one at a time. I wasn't jealous, but I might have been. You promised to be my sweetheart, you know, and the moment you saw Bessie Saxton you went off after her. It wasn't fair, especially as she had no brother."

"Well," he said laughing, "don't pretend you cared. I believe you were glad to get rid of me. You never answered one of my letters, and I brought the scent and hid it in that hollow tree:

your wilderness, and you never even looked for it. I know that because I found it there one day, ever so long afterwards."

"And you took it out and gave it to Bessie."

"How on earth did you know that?"

"Oh," she said, laughing at his discomfited face, "I only guessed it; I didn't suppose you would waste anything so valuable. But come, I must be getting home or I shall be late. Where are you going?"

"I was thinking of going to the Crow's Nest," he said somewhat hesitatingly.

"Then come with me," said Sheba, "and you can tell me all about what life at a sheep-station is like. Did you come back by Sydney?"

"Yes, and—I wanted to tell you I saw your mother there. I met her in George Street."

"Ah, poor mother," said Sheba, "she has had a long trial. How she must suffer . . . Tell me how she looked; was she worn and ill . . . and does she still have those dreadful headaches?"

"She looked remarkably well," said Ted. "She was just getting into a very swell carriage; she told me she had been shopping; she was beautifully dressed."

Sheba glanced down instinctively at her own shabby black gown. "Beautifully dressed," she said. "Wasn't she in mourning?"

"I don't know," said the boy, "if you call grey and white mourning. She looked about ten years younger than when she lived here, and it struck me altogether that she was very jolly and in very good spirits."

Sheba grew somewhat pale. This account did not tally at all with the martyr's letters, and the incessant plea of poverty which she had heard for the last twelve months. Her brows darkened ominously; a sudden resolve flashed into her mind. She said nothing of it to her companion, but walked on beside him for some moments in silence.

When she next spoke it was of something totally different, and Ted Sanderson followed her lead without the least suspicion of any mischief to accrue from his chance words. They reached the Crow's Nest, and Sheba left him in charge of the delighted girls and went to her own room.

She took off her hat and cloak, and then stood leaning her arms on the dressing-table and surveying herself in an abstracted and quite unconscious fashion.

"What does it mean?" she thought. "Well—beautifully dressed—ten years younger! Oh, it can't be; what do boys know about dress? . . . Why, only in her last letter she speaks

of her lonely, unhappy life . . . of how she misses us . . . how hard she has to work."

She paused abruptly and lifted her head.

"I will go and see for myself," she said resolutely. "I will tell no one. They shall not prepare her. I will leave early to-morrow before any one is up . . . I can walk to the ferry; it is only four miles off . . . and I have just money enough to pay for crossing. Yes . . . I *will* do it. She has never asked me to go and see her . . . never once come here. She cannot be surprised if I go just for a day."

The colour came back to her face. She smoothed her hair, and brushed the dust from her shabby gown, and then went back to the sitting-room to have her dinner.

But there was a change in her. She was the Sheba of old, sullen, disturbed, defiant; mind and temper were thrown out of gear, and Bessie's light foolish talk and Ted's incessant chatter seemed to irritate her beyond endurance.

Aunt Allison noticed the difference, but thought that something had gone wrong with her studies, or else that Ted's attentions to Bessie had annoyed her. She was far enough from suspecting the truth. The girl avoided her, and as soon as dinner was over went off to her own room with her books. Evening came, and instead of appearing at tea-time she sent word she had a bad headache and had gone to bed. Miss Saxton at once went to her and found her flushed and heavy-eyed, and evidently ill. But the girl would say nothing and only begged to be left alone, and Miss Saxton knew her peculiar disposition well enough to refrain from troubling her with questions. She made her drink some tea and then after a few gentle words of sympathy left her to herself.

All that night Sheba tossed and turned in sleepless misery. Towards daybreak she fell into a heavy slumber, but woke at six and started from her bed with a dull sense of trouble weighing on her mind and oppressing her memory. She was soon dressed, and leaving a pencilled note on the toilet table to explain her absence, she slipped out and through the garden, and gained the road without any one seeing her.

The air was keen and cold and exhilarating. She walked swiftly along the rough uneven road which led in a straight line to the ferry. It was too early for the steamer, but a boatman offered to take her across for a shilling, and she gladly agreed to give it.

At any other time she would have been in ecstasies over the lovely scene; the deep blue water, the rocky islands; the tower

ing cliffs of the Heads which shut in the harbour, the valleys clothed in primeval forests of pine, the white houses of the town gleaming in the sparkling sunlight, the masts and spars of innumerable vessels in the inner bay, and the far-off blue range of hills which bounded the horizon line.

But now though she noted them all, it was in a dreamy absorbed way. She only wanted to get to her destination. The ferryman pulled slowly and mechanically and it was half-an-hour before she reached the opposite side.

As they touched the wharf she handed him his shilling, and springing on shore took her way up the steep rough street which she remembered led into the town.

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## CHAPTER XX

### MRS. ORMATROYD DEFINES UNSELFISHNESS.

SHEBA took her way past the wharves and docks, looking about her with considerable curiosity. She had only been to Sydney once in her life, though it was so near West Shore, and it seemed to her a very wonderful and beautiful place.

It was too early in the morning for any great stir of life, and the girl being totally ignorant of what part of the town her mother lived in, wandered somewhat aimlessly about. She found herself in a narrow and unsavoury street chiefly populated by Chinese; then she passed warehouses, offices, public buildings, dark alleys, opening out here and there into wider and more important streets. Finally she made her way into George Street, where the shops were just opening, and an early omnibus or two was driving along in leisurely fashion amidst carts with market produce, fruit and fish.

Sheba began now to feel somewhat hungry. She walked into a baker's shop and bought a couple of rolls, and then asked the man who served her if he could direct her to Mr. Levison's private house.

"Mr. Levison," said the man. "Oh, he lives out at the Glebe. It's a long way from here. You'd better take an omnibus. One runs every hour from the corner of King Street."

Sheba thanked him and left the shop. She was not tired and a walk of four or five miles did not terrify her. Besides she had no more money and an omnibus would mean another shilling at least. She therefore set out resolutely to walk the distance, feeling rather pleased at the novelty of her surroundings.

The houses grew fewer after a time, and took the shape of villas more or less ambitious in design and surrounded by spacious grounds. Sheba glanced curiously at the gateways as she passed. At last she reached one sheltered by large oaks, and with a name carved in the stonework.

It was the name for which she was looking—"Oaklands"—Mr. Levison's place. Opening the handsome iron gate with considerable difficulty, Sheba entered, and found herself in a sort of avenue. The trees were gigantic even to her eyes, accustomed as they were to forest giants; the grounds all around were beautifully laid out with every variety of shrub and flowering plants. She found herself at last approaching the house. It looked almost palatial, she thought, though it was merely a wide two-storied building with a verandah running all round, supported by stone pillars.

The girl walked into the verandah, and passed two or three rooms with French windows opening on to it, and prettily draped with soft lace curtains.

Suddenly she paused. The sound of a familiar voice reached her ears. She looked straight before her into a room, the like of which she had never seen. The light of a bright wood-fire played over the costly furniture, the books and pictures and snowy napery and shining silver and dainty china. There were flowers and fruit, and wine and coffee on the table, and seated at it were two people: one a stout middle-aged Jewish-looking man, the other—

For a moment Sheba stood aghast. Could this be her mother: this the martyr she had pictured in the midst of sorrowful slavery! This laughing, rosy, comely woman with her fair hair crêped and puffed, her substantial figure in a loose grey morning gown of fashionable make and manifold trimmings of lace and ribbon, her fair plump hands busy with the silver and china of the breakfast equipage, her voice no longer harsh or complaining but gay and cheerful as her surroundings.

Sheba felt stunned and stupefied for a moment; the picture before her was so utterly different from the picture those mournful letters had framed, and her own fancy had supplemented.

Almost unconsciously her hand touched the fastening of the long windows, and the noise she made attracted Mr. Levison's attention. He turned in the direction and his exclamation of surprise caused his companion to do the same.

Seeing she was observed, Sheba turned the handle and walked into the room.

Dusty, pale, with lowered brows and angry eyes, she stood



before her mother, who was too utterly startled to do more than gasp out her name.

"Yes," said the girl, "it is I. . . . I have come to see you. . . . I thought you were ill, lonely, unhappy. . . . Your letters always said so, and it was so long. . . . twelve whole months."

Mrs. Ormatroyd's face grew perfectly livid. If it had not been for Mr. Levison's presence she felt she could have struck the girl in that first moment of rage and shame and speechless fury. As it was she did her best to calm her face into some expression of maternal joy, and rose slowly to her feet and kissed her daughter coldly on her brow.

"This is a great surprise," she said with asperity. "Why on earth didn't you write and say you were coming? And oh, good gracious! what a sight you look. . . . all over dust and mud."

"Is this your little girl?" asked Mr. Levison amiably and opportunely. "And so she has come over to see you at last. Dear me! Well, surprises are always pleasant. Come and shake hands with me, my dear, and let me see if you are at all like your handsome mother."

Sheba turned her dark and lowering face and wrathful eyes in the direction of the speaker, and then looked at him from top to toe. He bore the scrutiny with smiling good humour. He did not guess for a moment that that uncompromising young mind had put him down as vulgar and ostentatious, and that it cost the girl a great effort to give him her hand.

"No," said Mrs. Ormatroyd sharply, "she is not at all like me in anything. What a very odd thing of you to do, Sheba, to come across to Sydney without letting me know. What were the Saxtons about to let you?"

"I didn't tell them I was coming," said the girl, turning once more to look at the changed and most unmournful figure. Ten years younger. Yes, Ted was quite right.

"Ah," interposed Mr. Levison, "an impulse, an impulse of affection. How harming! A little—well, not home-sick—but mother-sick, eh? Upon my word I don't wonder at it! What should I do without her, so what must the loss be to her children?"

It was a new experience to Sheba to see her mother blush and cast down her eyes, and falter out bashful denial to compliments. It was an experience that turned her cold and sick, and made her ask herself if she were not the victim of some malignant dream.

"Well, well," continued Mr. Levison, "suppose we give you some breakfast; you look tired, and to have reached here by this time you must have started very early."

"I don't want any breakfast, thank you," said Sheba curtly. "Nonsense," said her mother sharply, "now you are here you must have something to eat. If Mr. Levison will excuse me a moment I will take you to my room, and you can wash the dust off your face and make yourself presentable. At present you look a perfect object."

Sheba said nothing. She felt her presence was undesirable, that her mother was angry and Mr. Levison surprised; but that matters would have been any better if she had only intimated her intention of paying them a visit, she never thought. In silence she followed her mother from the room, and Mr. Levison's eyes followed her with no small amusement and surprise.

"I thought she was quite a child," he said to himself as the door closed on the two figures. "Why, she is nearly grown up and looks like a tragedy queen. I wonder what she'll do when she hears the news? and what did she mean by saying she thought her mother was unhappy?"

Meanwhile Mrs. Ormatroyd led the way into a spacious and elegantly-furnished bedroom, then closing the door and bolting it she turned round on Sheba and seized her arm like a vice, while her face grew perfectly white with passion.

"How dare you?" she hissed out in a fury that nearly stifled her. "How dare you come here like this, you spy, you disobedient prying, underhand, hateful girl! You know I detest scenes. I had my own reasons for not wishing you to come here and now—"

Her grasp relaxed; she burst into a flood of angry passionate tears. Sheba only drew back and looked at her in white, stony wonderment. It seemed to her that her mother's anger was out of all proportion to her mistake. The old sickening sense of her own loneliness and lovelessness came over her and a burning wave of indignation swept through her heart as she asked herself in what lay her real offence.

"I see now," she said at last, "that you have good reasons for not wishing me to see you. Why did you not say so in your letters? You represented yourself as lonely and sad and hard worked, and I . . . oh, I felt so sorry always for you, and I thought only of being able to work for you and keep you, and I did Hex, and all the time——"

Her glance of wrathful disgust was like fuel to the fire. Mrs. Ormatroyd had been tried severely enough by the jarring discord of her presence, and now that she dare to add reproach to so unwelcome an intrusion it was unnatural to suppose that a maternal spirit could bear such treatment with equanimity.

"You are a perfect little idiot!" she cried stamping her foot. "Ever since you could walk or stand alone you have done nothing but worry and vex me. I never heard of any one doing such things as you do, never. Did you suppose I was going to wear black all the rest of my days, and never smile or take any pleasure in life again? Such rubbish! And as for you and Hex working for me—why, you talk like a baby! You work for me—you! Why, you haven't the sense necessary to get your own living, leave alone supporting any one else, and I am not of the nature to accept sacrifices, even from my children! But, thank Heaven, there will be no need for you to *work*, as you so grandiloquently talk of doing, and as for Hex—well, he shall have only his mother to thank for his prospects. I have made up my mind he shall go to England and have a profession."

"But how—when?" asked Sheba in a stifled voice as Mrs. Ormatroyd paused from sheer want of breath. "Go to England . . . where will you get the money?"

Mrs Ormatroyd drew herself up and shook out her delicate grey craperies, and looked straight at her daughter's white pressed face. Then she said slowly, clearly, without falter or tremor in her voice:

*"I am going to marry Mr. Levison."*

For a moment Sheba stood there perfectly motionless. Every drop of blood seemed to rush to her heart, and then flow in a boiling wrathful torrent through her veins.

It seemed as awful as if her mother had said she was going to commit a crime. *Marry Mr. Levison!* Marry again, and that odious, stout, Jewish man with his thick lips and greasy black hair and vulgar manners. Oh, the shame, the horror; and her father, her poor forgotten father!

"Well," said Mrs. Ormatroyd sharply, "are you going to stand here all day? I daresay you are surprised . . . I was surprised myself. He is so rich . . . and he knows almost every one worth knowing in Sydney . . . but still he has done me the honour to propose, and though I don't approve of second marriages, this is quite an exceptional case, and I owe it to my children to provide for them, not leave them to the charity of strangers."

Sheba coloured hotly.

"You don't—care—for this man, then," she said.

"Care?" Mrs. Ormatroyd looked a little perplexed. "Do you mean am I in love like some romantic school-girl? Good heavens, no! But I am going to marry him."

"Oh, mother!" cried Sheba in a voice of such horror, and yet such misery, that Mrs. Ormatroyd started.

"Why do you stare like that?" she cried resentfully; "and don't call me mother in that vehement manner. I hate it, and it's no use your making yourself disagreeable over the affair. I have a perfect right to do what I like."

"If you wanted money," Sheba went on regardlessly, "Hex and I would have worked for you. We thought and talked of nothing else all this year, and now to think of your doing this, selling yourself to a vulgar hateful Jew, just because——"

"Sheba!" stormed her mother, "be silent, I insist on it. How dare you speak so of my—my future husband, and your future father?"

"Never," burst tempestuously from the girl's lips, "never, never *that!* I wouldn't call him by that name if you killed me for refusing; I won't live with him, I would sooner drown myself. It is wicked to put another man in poor papa's place; a child cannot have two fathers, and no woman ought to have two husbands. It is a sin, and I am sure God never meant it!"

Mrs. Ormatroyd sank down on a chair and fairly gasped. What on earth was she to say to such an utterly irrational, headstrong creature, as this awful daughter of hers? Why, she was worse than ever, and she was too tall now and too old-looking to be beaten into subjection.

Was ever any mother so tried? . . . and there was breakfast waiting and Mr. Levison of course expecting their return . . . and how could she take this rude, outspoken, unmanageable creature into his presence? Why she would insult him to his face.

Her heart grew bitter within her. The dislike she always felt to dictation or opposition, in no way helped her to condone Sheba's offences in that line. She wondered, as she had often done, why Providence had thought fit to inflict her with such a daughter, and only wished it were possible to beat Sheba, or shut her up here for twenty-four hours with nothing but bread and water. As this was not quite possible she next thought herself of her old plan of rule by authority, and turning to the girl she said with dignity:

"Sheba, I brought you up to show your parents implicit obedience; a fine thing indeed if one is to be dictated to by one's own children. Now listen to me, and remember that I will not discuss this matter with you again. In the first place, Mr. Levison is not a Jew, at least by religion. He cannot of course help what his parents were. He is extremely kind and has been a very good friend to me and will be an equally good friend to my children, just as I am prepared to be a mother to his little girl."

You know very well my health is not strong, and I am not fit to battle with the world, and it would be simply flying in the face of Providence to throw away such an offer as this. I was myself coming over to West Shore to see Hex and you, and tell you all about it, but you have upset all my arrangements and annoyed me excessively by this uncalled-for visit. It is just one of your mad freaks; I was in hopes you had outgrown them. However, now I have taken the trouble to explain all this, you must prepare to accept the change in my life as—as resignedly as I do. It is not my own happiness I am considering . . . only my children's future good, and one day you will see it, and perhaps thank God in your rebellious heart for such an unselfish and sacrificing mother."

Sheba listened in stony silence; her face was very pale, her lips sternly set. Scorn and disgust spoke out more plainly than any words in her look and attitude. As if she could not read between the lines . . . as if she did not know what her mother's "sacrifices" meant. Why did she not speak the truth? why was she not honest enough to say: "I don't like being an upper servant when I have the chance of being mistress. I want wealth, comfort, shelter, ease; I have the chance of them all and I mean to take it." Sheba felt she could have respected that statement if only for its coarse frankness, but to listen to pretty platitudes, and misrepresented facts, to see selfishness wreathed and garlanded with floral tributes like the sacrificial beasts of the old idolatrous faiths, it was too hateful!

Mrs. Ormatroyd felt uncomfortable at the long silence, the colourless mute face. "What have you to say?" she asked sharply. "One would think you were deaf. Will you come back to the breakfast-room and be civil to Mr. Levison? Your manner when I introduced you was almost insulting—but then you did not know——"

"I will never accept him as my father," reiterated Sheba sternly.

"That," said Mrs. Ormatroyd, "may be as you please. If you do not wish to live under my roof I must make other arrangements for you. Thank goodness, I have one loving and dutiful child. Hex will be with me at all events. I shall go back with you this afternoon to the Crow's Nest, and see them all and break the news. I do not wish my actions misrepresented."

A little odd smile just touched Sheba's pale lips. "You need not fear," she said, "that I should do—that."

## CHAPTER XXI.

## PERSUASION.

MRS. ORMATROYD returned to the breakfast-room alone. Mr. Levison was still at the table. He looked up expectantly.

"Where's your little girl?" he said. "I just told nurse to bring Dolly down, I thought she would amuse her."

"My poor child is dreadfully fatigued," said Mrs. Ormatroyd apologetically. "She has been foolish enough to walk all the way from the ferry, and is quite knocked up. I have made her lie down, and you must excuse her. She will be better after a rest."

"Have you told her the news?" asked Mr. Levison.

"Of course," said Mrs. Ormatroyd with a fluttered blush. "It was a great surprise—very great. She is such an odd child, so different to her brother. Sheba has always been a trouble and anxiety to me. I really can't understand her."

"So she doesn't like the idea?" said Mr. Levison, rising and cutting short further explanations. "I thought she wouldn't when I saw how she looked at me——"

"Oh, I assure you," said Mrs. Ormatroyd eagerly, "she likes you very well, and she is so pleased to think I shall have a home at last."

He laughed—a little grimly. "Well," he said, "it won't matter one way or other. She will get used to me after a bit. And now I must be off. I shall be late at the office. Dear me—nearly eleven o'clock. Your little girl will stay now she is here, I suppose?"

"No," said Mrs. Ormatroyd, "I fear not; she must go back to-day, and I am going with her if—if you don't object. I wish to see my son, and also make some arrangements with those people with whom Sheba has been staying. Besides"—and she looked at the ground with becoming bashfulness—"now that I am engaged to you, it is not—well, not quite *etiquette* for me to remain under your roof. I really think I had better stay with the Saxtons until—until the time fixed for our marriage."

"Oh, damn *etiquette*," said David Levison good-humouredly. "I can't have you all that way off, you know. If you want to stay anywhere you can go to the Moss's in Fort Street. They'll be delighted to have you, and they're sort of cousins of mine by marriage. I'll arrange it all."

"Just as you please," said Mrs. Ormatroyd, to whom a visit to

the Crow's Nest did not specially commend itself. Then she rang to have the table cleared, and took a chastely saddened farewell of her affianced, and saw him leave for his office with inward satisfaction. Once alone she ordered the carriage to be ready in half-an-hour's time, and then went to her room to change her morning gown for an out-door costume of plain black cloth.

Sheba was sitting by the window and watched her mother's preparations in silence.

"I am going to take you back," Mrs. Ormatroyd said presently. "I shall give the Saxtons a piece of my mind for letting you start off by yourself in this fashion."

"I told you they did not know," said Sheba wearily. "I left the Crow's Nest at six o'clock."

"You deserve to be locked up and kept on bread and water," said her mother wrathfully. "If you were only a little younger I would do it. Heaven knows when you are going to get a little sense, or behave like a rational creature! I should have thought with such an example as Bessie Saxton's you would have improved in some slight degree, but your present conduct doesn't look as if you had."

Sheba set her lips tight and said nothing. She felt it would be useless. She had done an unwise thing in coming here, and she felt herself an unwelcome intruder in what would soon be her mother's own house.

Its beauty and luxury did not appeal to her in any single degree; rather they awoke in her a feeling of shame and degradation, since it was for things like these that Mrs. Ormatroyd was about to sell herself, and so wreck the whole of Sheba's schemes for an independent future.

When the carriage was announced she followed her mother without deigning to cast a look at the rooms through which they passed. The only thing that moved her was the sudden appearance of a little, fair-haired, laughing child, who ran out into the verandah as they left it, and called out after Mrs. Ormatroyd.

That lady turned instantly, and then went back and took the child in her arms and kissed her with the warmest affection, explaining that she would be back next day, a fact about which the little girl did not appear to concern herself.

Sheba looked on and wondered if she had ever received such caresses, or been addressed by such endearing words. If so, she decided it must all have happened before her memory had been roused from the passive into the active state.

Then they got into the carriage and drove off, Mrs. Ormatroyd

maintaining a dignified silence until they reached the ferry, and took the steamer across to the opposite shore.

When they reached the landing-place the first person they saw was Noel Hill. Mrs. Ormatroyd greeted him with dignity and immediately treated him to a dissertation on Sheba's extraordinary freak and its consequent trouble and annoyance to herself.

"And however I am to walk to the Crow's Nest I can't imagine," she lamented. "I am so unused to exercise now, and Mr. Levison always insists upon my having the carriage . . . it is all owing to this inconsiderate and vexatious girl!"

"I never wanted you to come back with me," said Sheba curtly. "It was your own desire. And you know there are no cabs this side of the water!"

Noel Hill interposed. He saw that matters were a little strained between mother and daughter. He suggested that Mrs. Ormatroyd should rest at the Parsonage, which was only two miles off, and then—and then if she felt equal to the fatigue she might go on to the Crow's Nest in the evening.

To this Mrs. Ormatroyd consented, and the trio set out to walk up the long rough hilly road.

Mrs. Ormatroyd chattered volubly in a light agreeable fashion, having learnt during her residence in Sydney that she was entitled to consider herself fascinating, and even intellectual—and intellect, in her opinion, was chiefly made known to the world in general by fluency of conversation.

Sheba was quite silent. She felt faint and weak after her long journey and her long fast, and she looked so weary and so miserable that Noel Hill found himself again and again wondering what had happened.

Mrs. Ormatroyd's incessant chatter about Sydney society, and Sydney gaieties, irritated him almost beyond endurance, though he did his best to listen with some show of interest.

He was thankful when they reached the Parsonage and he could leave Mrs. Ormatroyd to indulge in maternal ecstasies over Hex who had grown so tall and looked so well, and was more like herself, she fondly declared, than ever.

As soon as his uncle appeared, Noel Hill slipped away. He had seen Sheba leave the room and cross the verandah, and he wondered where the girl was going. He followed and overtook her at the gate.

"Where are you going, Miss Sheba?" he asked quickly. "Not to the Crow's Nest, surely?"

"Yes," said the girl, "I am not wanted here—why should I stay?"



"But your mother has only just arrived," he said ; "you surely won't leave her so abruptly?"

For all answer Sheba opened the gate and walked down the road. He hesitated a moment or two—then followed.

"What has happened to you?" he asked quickly as he reached her side, "you look so strange, and your manner is so odd. Was your mother angry with you for going over to Sydney? I don't wonder at it. The Saxtons are also very much annoyed. You ought to have told them."

Sheba stopped short and looked at him. "Are they angry too?" she faltered. "I did not mean to do anything wrong . . . but it is always so with me . . . I only wanted to see my mother—to know if what Ted Sanderson had said about her was true—"

"And was it?" he asked gently, as her voice broke into a half-suppressed sob.

"Yes," she said stormily, "quite true! she has forgotten papa—forgotten us too, I think. She wears fine clothes and lives in a beautiful house, and she is going to—to marry the man who owns it—"

The disgust and wrath in her face would have amused Noel Hill had it not been for the inward tragedy it displayed. He was not surprised at her news. Mrs. Ormatroyd's hints and simpers had prepared him for it in some measure. Besides it was just the sort of thing he would have expected her to do, and then pose as a martyr for doing.

"And I thought she was unhappy," Sheba cried passionately—"unhappy and working herself to death for us, and my whole thought has been to lift the burden from her shoulders . . . to fit myself to work that she might rest, and all the time . . . all the time—"

She turned aside. Her chest heaved. Great bitter tears welled into her eyes. Noel Hill read the struggle going on within her heart, and he pitied her with all the depth and earnestness of his own. But he dared not tell her so. In her present state of mind he felt it would be unwise, and that—even if it hurt her—he must show her the path where duty led, and bid her curb the resentment of passion, and the instincts of revolt.

"Sheba," he said gently, "don't go to the Crow's Nest in your present mood. Come back with me and let us go to my own little study and talk this matter quietly over. I can feel it is a trial to you; but my teachings must have been of very little effect if you have not learnt that life is made up of such trials, and that they must be faced—endured with patience, not rebellion. You

know I never preach to you—it is not my way—but be guided by my advice now. I don't think you will be sorry for it."

"You are always good to me," said the girl with a heavy sob. "I think you are the only person I have ever met who does really understand me! Yes—I will go back with you. I have let my temper run away with me as usual. I am sorry I ever went to Sydney!"

He did not say more, only walked quietly by her side till they reached the house and then led the way into his own little "den," as he called it, where he wrote and studied and sometimes gave his lessons.

There he made her sit down in the big old leather chair, and presently brought her a cup of tea and some biscuits, which he insisted upon her eating before he would speak to her at all.

The result was that Sheba soon became calm and refreshed, and was more prepared to look upon her impulsive action in the rational light of her tutor's eyes. Her nature was firm, and not stubborn, and she was always easily ruled by affection or rational appeal; unfortunately her mother had never employed either of these methods, and hence it was that the two natures so invariably clashed in all matters that entailed discussion.

Noel Hill went to work gently and skilfully. He pointed out that a child's duty was obedience—up to a certain point; that her mother had a perfect right to please herself and marry again if she thought it desirable. It might seem a moral offence to Sheba's overstrained and utterly innocent ideas, but the world did not consider it so, and Mrs. Ormatroyd was not likely to sacrifice ease and comfort for sake of a child's prejudice.

"But I cannot look upon him as a father," cried the girl, "and I could not bear to live under his roof as she says I must—I could not."

"But if it is your duty?" said Noel Hill gently. "Remember that the Saxtons are not even relatives—you cannot expect them to offer you a home always—circumstances will be altogether different; and people will really blame your mother if you do not live under her roof. You see you place her in an uncomfortable position as well as yourself."

Sheba was silent. Self-will, duty and inclination were having a fierce battle within her heart.

"Oh!" she cried, "why can't things remain as they are? I should be always altering and changing. . . . I was so happy. . . . and I thought it would last, and now everything is different—everything."

"Change is a law of nature and a law of life," said Noel Hill.

"Nothing remains quiescent, that is why happiness should always be received with trembling fear—not with exultant certainty. Existence has infinitely more prose than poetry about it, though that sounds an unpalatable truth in the ears of sixteen. As I have often told you, I hate to preach; but there are certain things that must be said, and, young as you are, you have learnt that sorrow is a more constant friend than joy."

Sheba moved restlessly. "I hope," she said suddenly, "that the dead do not—know. I was thinking of poor papa. Just a year—barely a year . . . and now to give his place to some one else: call a stranger—husband."

Noel Hill looked at her with thoughtful searching eyes. "How true a nature," he thought, "and how deeply she will love—some day."

It hurt him to see the pain in her eyes as they sought his, beseeching in some way for comfort which he felt he could not give—for duty is a hard thing to preach, and a distasteful thing to practise, and yet he could but speak to her of it, and its exactions and possible reward.

He spoke as he felt—sincerely, conscientiously, earnestly—but all the time he felt very sorry for the girl, and he did not anticipate any wholesome results—to her—from the forthcoming sacrifices entailed by her mother's new mode of life.

The past year had done her a great deal of good. He scarcely liked to think what another might—undo. But it was not his way to hint discouragement, and when, half-an-hour later, Sheba entered the sitting-room where her mother was still occupied in setting Hex, and painting a brilliant future for him as a reward for his patience and dutifulness in the past, all traces of ill-temper and insubordination had vanished, and she was so meek and quiet that Mrs. Ormatroyd could not understand the change at all. She was still more puzzled when, finding herself alone with her mother for a few moments, Sheba rose and standing before her said quietly: "I must ask you to forgive me for my rudeness this morning. I had no right to speak to you as I did. I will try to—to like Mr. Levison—if you wish."

Had Mrs. Ormatroyd been a wise woman, she would have accepted the girl's submission with some sense of the ordeal her spirit had gone through ere she would have made it; but, not being wise, she only drew herself up haughtily and delivered to her daughter a lecture both severe and judicial on the subject of her unbearable temper, her physical shortcomings, and general deficiencies.

It was gall and wormwood to poor Sheba to listen to it after

the effort her penitence had cost her. But she did listen, and without a word, and when it was over only crept quietly away to the farthest and most remote corner of her old "wilderness," and there, throwing herself down under the great leafless trees, she cried as if her heart would break—cried as she had never done during all the weeks and days of this past year that stood out alone in her short and troubled life, as "happy."

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## CHAPTER XXII.

### INTROSPECTION.

Two months later, when the glorious Australian spring was holding its brief reign, Mrs. Ormatroyd was married, and Sheba had to bid farewell to the Crow's Nest. Never had the old house looked so lovely, she thought, buried as it was in masses of blossom from the peach and orange and pear trees that surrounded it so closely, and made the whole air heavy with their fragrance. Never had she so valued the time and liberty to roam at will through the wild bush tracts, where as yet neither house, nor hut, nor settlement betrayed the advance of civilized life.

For days before she left the girl spent her time in wandering to all her favourite nooks and resorts. Sometimes Bessie Saxton went with her, but more often she went alone, or with Billy trotting at her heels; poor, pretty Billy, who must be left behind when his young mistress went to her new home, as Mrs. Ormatroyd would not hear of the Levison grounds being desecrated by such a specimen of animal life.

Bessie could not sympathize at all with her friend's dislike to the Sydney prospect. She thought her more than foolish. What was the use of being buried in a place like West Shore, where you never saw a human creature, outside the members of your own family, from one year's end to another? She had intimate hopes of sharing in Sydney gaieties and luxuries, for the new Mrs. Levison would surely invite her to stay with them. She was therefore very amiable at present to the girl, and specially bent on impressing on her mind the advantages that would naturally accrue from her mother's changed prospects.

But Sheba did not seem impressed by any of Bessie's arguments, and they certainly did nothing towards raising her spirits, or reconciling her to the change so near at hand.

The day before she left the Crow's Nest she rose very early,

and making her breakfast off a slice of bread and some milk, she set out to bid farewell to the old house and the "wilderness," which represented to her so much that was happy, and sorrowful, and strange and perplexed, of her child-life.

It was very early—scarcely five o'clock—the dew still lay on bud and blossom, and the dusty road was damp and sweet, as if with the tears of some new-fallen shower.

A soft wind blew the heavy fragrance of the peach and orange blossoms across her face as she walked past the old familiar palings; starry passion flowers were wreathing the wooden pillars of the verandah; the great oleander tree that fronted the steps was a maze of rose-coloured blossom, and its rich, sweet scents were to Sheba as the greeting of an old friend.

She felt her eyes grow dim as she looked at it—the pride of the garden—the loveliest tree of its kind in the whole neighbourhood; that strong, sweet perfume turned her faint with many memories. Whenever she felt the scent of the oleander blossoms she always thought of one scene in her life . . . how she had stood under the great tree one mild spring evening, and Ted Sanderson had brought her a book, and she had opened it and read the first story—the story of a boy who had been accidentally killed by a schoolfellow in a fit of passion. There had been a picture of it, and she had shuddered with horror as she had looked at the beautiful young dead face, and the terrified, remorseful eyes of the boy criminal as he gazed at his victim. The story had been to her like a real thing. She had *seen* the very persons who took part in it—had followed out the incidents even to the bringing home of the dead boy in his coffin, and the agonized grief of his heartbroken mother.

She had been so wrought upon by the story that she had sat there under the rosy blossoms, with the book on her lap and the heavy tears falling on its pages, until long after the time she should have been in bed, and then had been sharply reprimanded for her conduct, and obliged to give up the book as a punishment.

How it all came back to her now—how it always had come back every time that the oleander broke into flower, and its subtle perfume thrilled her senses with almost painful intensity.

She wondered why memory was almost always painful to her, why scenes and faces and deeds became almost tragic in what they represented, or recalled. The fact of remembering too intensely is a great drawback to happiness—Sheba had always found it so. She wondered whether she always would find it so, as she stood in the old familiar garden and looked with loving and regretful eyes at every tree and flower that held a history of

some sort for her. Then soberly and silently she walked on past the old well where the frogs were croaking, and past the hives where the bees hummed and swarmed so busily, and everywhere the ground was starred with the delicate pink and white of fallen blossoms, or rich with colour of newly-opened flowers.

The "wilderness" seemed alive with bird and insect life. Bright-winged birds flew about the boughs, gorgeous butterflies fluttered through a maze of leafy shrubs, and a wall of tender green seemed to shut out the brilliant blue of the sky, and shut in the peace and solitude that nature loves best, and that always seems to consecrate her handiwork.

Sheba sank down on her knees and hid her face in her hands. Another chapter of her life had ended, and she felt instinctively that the future meant struggle, difficulty, hardship, and—only too probably—unhappiness.

Conflict and duty—life seemed made up of these elements, and only the warm sure shelter of deep human love could in any way make such life enduring. But she was not going to any such shelter; only to a narrow and trying existence, at which she looked now with that sad hopelessness of extreme youth, when the soul is full of desires, and the world answers them with chill laughter, or heartless silence.

The thrill and ecstasy which had once swept over her senses as she pictured all too vividly what Love might mean, had faded into a dim and colourless outline.

Filled to the core and centre of her being with thirsty, passionate longings after the good, the beautiful, the true, she only saw the gates of the future closing on all such desires, only felt her young eager soul strain as the ear strains after dying harmonies, to hear them sink faintly, irrevocably away into unreachable space. She knelt there in the silence and beauty of the young day, and wondered vaguely why life had always seemed to her so sad a thing; why even nature, for which she had so tender a love, always touched her heart too deeply for pleasure to counter-balance pain. And of such feelings she could speak to no one, having some sure perception that they would not be understood, and might only serve as food for mockery. As much as it was possible for her to confide, she had confided in Noel Hill, but there was a wide space between their two natures, and she knew that in his eyes she was but a child. Her heart was in excess of her mind; she *felt* too fiercely and eagerly to reason as to *what* she felt, and until she could subdue that spirit and bring it down to the nearer level of every-day commonplace humanity, she would never find existence a comfortable thing.

If individual life was just suited to its individual surroundings, there would be an end to all such conflicts as these, and character would need no discipline, but expand naturally under congenial influences. But, looking out on the battle-field of humanity, we find that the surroundings are invariably at variance with the character, disposition and mind of the individual. Hence the perpetual warfare which Sheba's awakening soul began dimly to recognize, and for which her strange nature was as dimly endeavouring to arm itself.

Shut in now in her self-chosen solitude, she went over every detail of her child-life. She felt sorry for herself as she let her memory range over those mistaken heroisms, those pitiful mistakes, those ill-aimed intentions which invariably fell short of their mark, those hours of prayers and tears and struggles! And amongst them all what a lonely figure she looked—uncomprehended and uncomprehending, yet feeling the keenness of need, the strength of impulse, as one far beyond her years and experience might have felt them.

Sheba had gone through many phases of feeling and many grades of experience in her short life, by reason of that habit of hers of *thinking out* everything that came into that life. She did not pass things by as mere accidents of occurrence, but looked into the why and wherefore of them all, and formed her own theories respecting them. But now it seemed to her that her spirit had suddenly lost its way in the mazes of life. The irrevocable law of change had stepped between her and the peace and happiness she had enjoyed for one short year, and as she lifted her troubled face to Heaven and faltered out some fragmentary prayer, she yet could not but acknowledge that the vital principle of religion was as a dead letter to her soul, and that long familiarity with its "forms" yet seemed of very little help or sustenance in moments such as these.

A sudden wave of bitterness came over her heart. "What am I, that God should care for me, or listen to me?" she thought. "Have I ever had a prayer answered? has ever one single thing in my life been altered though I brought all my faith to the petition that asked it? No. It seems time and feeling wasted on nothing. It is all very well for Noel Hill to talk; he is a clergyman, and he lives for God's service, and perhaps God does recognize him and his work—but as for me——"

There she broke off, almost frightened at her own audacity. "Oh, how wicked I am!" she thought, and a faint sob broke the stillness of her leafy shelter. "Why can't I remember God's way is not man's way?"

But though she put rebellion aside, it was not conquered. She was too young and fervid for the philosophy of stoics, and that deeper, sweeter patience that comes as the discipline of endurance and accepted sorrow, was as yet a stranger to her nature.

She had never felt so utterly lonely as she felt in this hour, because she had never before gone so deeply into the root and meaning of her feelings. The panorama of her childish life had unrolled itself scene by scene, incident by incident, until it had faded away, and now she seemed to awake and ask herself, "What next?" And even as she asked it she trembled, disturbed by some vague fear. Visions of a narrow beaten track she must perforce tread, of domestic tyranny to which she must yield, of perpetual self-sacrifice amounting almost to intellectual extinction rose before her eyes, and her heart throbbed in passionate revolt, crying out, "I cannot bear it; this—is not life!"

Then a sudden flush of shame stole to her cheek and her heart seemed to grow quiet and humble. What was she, one small insignificant atom in the vast heaving, throbbing mass of humanity, that life should come to her in other guise than it came to infinitely greater and worthier souls? What was she, to demand a richer, fuller, more wonderful existence?—as if her will and pleasure were central figures in the universe, and her nature deserved special response to its exactions.

She felt like some frightened pigmy who had taken up arms against a giant, and on seeing the giant approach could only throw them down in terror, and beg for mercy.

She drew a long deep breath and pushed the heavy hair away from her brow. It seemed to her that she had ignored the Pattern of all lives, the Source of strength and Teacher of fortitude: that she must bring herself to sit at His footstool and learn meekness and endurance as the greatest of all life's lessons, because their learning involves the utter forfeiture of all self-glory.

It would be hard—she could picture nothing harder; but even as her eyes sought the far-off heavens a soft and sudden peace stole over her troubled heart, and a voice seemed whispering through the rustling leaves, and a voice seemed whispering through the rustling leaves, "Do thy duty now; hereafter shalt thou learn the wherefore."

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

## ENDURING.

"I REALLY think," said Mrs. Levison complacently, "that Sheba has very much improved. She is not nearly as passionate or as wilful as she used to be. Her manners are better, too—more self-possessed and lady-like. If only she was a little more presentable!"

She sighed and looked across the table at her husband. Dinner was just removed, but they were lingering over the pleasant frivolities of dessert, and Mrs. Levison was ready to indulge in the confidential chit-chat her soul loved, and which to Sheba was unmitigated boredom.

Mr. Levison stretched out his legs under cover of his costly mahogany, and tossed off a glass of wine before answering his wife's observation.

"Improved?" he said. "Well, I'm glad you think so; I don't. She's as proud as Lucifer and as cold as an icicle. All she seems to care for is books and music. When she's not reading she's strumming or singing. Isn't it about time her education was finished? She's nearly seventeen, isn't she?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Levison; "I can't believe it. I can't fancy that I have a daughter grown up!"

Mr. Levison laughed a little grimly. Two years ago he might have fallen into the trap, and made the expected rejoinder as to the relationship appearing more sisterly than maternal—but that was two years ago.

"She certainly is grown up," he said. "You'll have to bring her out a little more this winter; she looks much older than she is."

"You needn't say that," said his wife pettishly, "or people will say I have been keeping her back. Society is always ill-natured."

Society—as Mrs. Levison called the compound mixture of rich Jews, wealthy business folk, and miscellaneous individuals of no particular status that made up her circle of acquaintances, to whose houses she went, and who in turn honoured her dinners and dances—was not at all ill-natured with respect to her, but she was pleased to think so. She liked to imagine herself an object of envy to persons who could not boast of descent from a good old English family: who had not so fine a house or smart a carriage, and, above all, knew not the glory of having a yearly box from England with the latest fashions in dress and millinery, with which she might adorn her comely person.

For things had gone very smoothly with the late Mrs. Orm-troyd. Mr. Levison was very good-natured and let her have her own way in almost everything. His riches were always on the increase, and he denied her few things on which she had set her heart. On one point he had been firm, though, most unexpectedly firm, and that was in refusing to let Hex go to England and study for a profession as his mother had so ardently desired.

"Stuff and nonsense," he said, in answer to her entreaties; "the colonies are good enough for men of capital like me; they're good enough for young whipper-snappers like your son. There are too many people in the old country already. We'll keep what we've got here. The boy shall have a good commercial education and a good berth in my office as soon as he's old enough, and I'm sorry for him if he doesn't like his prospects. I only wish I had had such chances. I'd have been Premier now."

So Mrs. Levison, after a good deal of fretting and grumbling, to which her new spouse paid not the smallest attention, gave up the project, for which Hex himself was not at all sorry. He had no brilliant gifts and he hated learning, so the thought of "exams" had not been a pleasant thought. He went to the best school in Sydney, and it is only fair to say, learnt as little as he possibly could, though he became a famous cricketer and oarsman.

With regard to Sheba, her resolutions of patience and forbearance had been severely tested. Her step-father never liked her and they were constantly at variance. If she showed the smallest inclination to proceed in one way, her mother persistently pulled her back into another. It was her system of discipline, as she considered Sheba terribly self-willed. She had engaged a French master and a music master for her, and considered that was quite sufficient to "finish" her education. Girls ought not to know too much, it made them conceited. But Sheba's passion for books, tempered by Noel Hill's judicious hints for self-instruction, stood her in good stead, and Mr. Levison was only too pleased that she should make use of his really very creditable library, which was quite a white elephant to himself.

Those hours her mother spent in dressing, visiting and entertaining or being entertained, were always spent by the girl in close and earnest study.

Often and often she longed for Noel Hill's advice and assistance but for the first year of her life in Sydney she never saw him though he frequently wrote to her. However, she had recently received from him the news that he had been appointed curate at St. Margaret's, Sydney, and was coming over almost immediately.

It was the satisfactory and glow of expectance raised by this letter, that had led to Mrs. Levison's remark as to Sheba's improved manners and disposition.

The prospect of introducing her daughter into what she termed "society" was not a pleasing prospect to Mrs. Levison. In the first place it would make her look old, and really with her easy-going life and her fashionable toilettes she was used to being complimented on her youthful appearance, and accustomed to consider herself as still on the safe side of that debatable ground, "middle-age."

But with a daughter as tall as herself, and of such stately manners and pronounced ideas, who looked quite twenty though she was not seventeen, what should she do? Australian girls, as a rule, were pretty and bright and lively, but Sheba had none of these attractions. No one in their senses, so Mrs. Levison decreed, would call that dark face, with its sombre flashing eyes, and coronet of hair, and proud set lips, pretty.

It was striking, and so in a way was the tall young form with its stately grace of movement, but then now-a-days people went in for brightness, audacity, *chic*, as Bessie Saxton called it, and Sheba possessed not one of these charms.

So she sat on there in her luxuriously-appointed dining-room and held forth to Mr. Levison on all these points, while he sipped his wine and thought complacently of the prospect of the next election, at which he was almost sure to be returned, and paid no heed whatever to his wife's somewhat tautological discourse.

Meanwhile the object of that discourse was sitting by the wood-fire in the library, listening half-amused and half-bored to the precocious chatter of Miss Dolly Levison.

That young lady had been thoroughly spoilt by her father, in whose eyes she represented all that was perfect, beautiful and clever in childhood. His wife having long since discovered this weakness of his turned it to good account, and also petted and flattered the child in such a manner that her natural good qualities were fast disappearing, and she was developing into a pert, forward little minx, who tyrannized over every one in the household except Sheba. She stood somewhat in awe of her, and in a way respected her because she was so uncompromising and so straightforward. She was a pretty child with dark saucy eyes and a cloud of fair hair about her shoulders, and a passion for bright colours and gaudy jewellery, probably inherited from her Semitic ancestry.

She wore a bright scarlet frock just now, and a coral necklace and a gold bracelet respectively adorned her neck and arm. She was holding forth to Sheba on the glories of a child's party she had been to on the previous evening.

"No one had such a pretty dress as mine," she said complacently. "Mrs. Moss came up and asked who made it, and I told her it was a French dress, and had been sent out in mamma's last box, and Sarah Moss did look so cross. They have all their clothes made here, you know, by Miss Page, and she can't cut a skirt properly at all. Theirs hang like bags, and they will wear such big crinolines. You never wear crinolines at all, Sheba; but if you 'come out' this winter you will have to. Mamma says she won't go about with such a dowdy."

Sheba smiled a little. "Won't she; well, I'm afraid then I shan't come out at all. I certainly will never wear a crinoline. They're too hideous for anything; making every woman look like an inflated balloon."

"Well, you look quite as funny without one, in your dresses," said Miss Dolly, tossing her fair crimped locks. "Whatever makes you go to that queer woman to have them made? Now at Clarke's in George Street you can get them very well done, and the Governor's family all go there."

"I like my dresses to be comfortable," said Sheba, "and Madame Toinette is an artist in her way. She is very poor, I know, and lives in a little back street, but for all that she has taste and skill, and she pleases me."

"I never saw any one who cared so little about dress as you do," went on the child, looking at her with curious eyes; "your mother *dreams* about it when she's going to have a new one. She takes days to decide on the trimmings and flounces, and you——"

"Have neither to decide about," laughed Sheba. "That is the best of having one's gowns always made the same way."

"But when you go to your first ball——" said Dolly.

"I am not going to any balls," the girl answered impatiently. "Dancing is a ridiculous way of wasting time, and time is a thing for which we shall all have to account. Our years are short enough, and when there is so much ignorance and distress in the world, it seems wicked to shut one's eyes to it, and spend one's days in frivolous amusements which benefit no one."

"Oh, gracious!" cried Dolly, opening wide her own eyes, "you talk like a clergyman. Fancy not going to balls because other people in the world are in distress! I never heard anything so ridiculous. Catch me doing it! Why I've thought out my first ball-dress already. I mean to wear white satin and pearls. I have always made up my mind to wear that ever since I read the description of the state ball at Buckingham Palace."

"I think if you were to read sensible books and learn you

lessons, instead of studying dresses and shop windows, you would be all the better," said Sheba impatiently.

"I shall have plenty of money," said the child loftily. "I don't require to be clever."

"You will be a true daughter of Israel," answered Sheba with asperity. "Money—that is a fitting god for a race who once worshipped a golden calf! As far as my experience goes I can only say that rich people are odious—a mass of ostentation, vulgarity, and pretence. I would sooner have brains than riches any day!"

She rose from her seat as she spoke, and crossed the room to the bookcase. She had changed very much. She was tall and slender, and had a certain air of quiet dignity about her that stamped her every movement. She wore a gown of some soft grey stuff, girded at the waist with an antique silver girdle; at her throat nestled a crimson rose, the only spot of colour that relieved the almost nun-like simplicity of her attire. Her hair in its glorious masses of dusky brown was coiled round her small well-shaped head; her face was still colourless, but had lost its old sallow hue and taken that clear olive tint which is essentially a brunette's charm.

No one could have looked at her without interest, though probably many would do so without admiration. Her eyes had even exceeded the promise of her childhood—they made her face remarkable at once—they were so large, so deep, so full of passionate life and eager thoughts. To look into them was to look into a human soul, and lose yourself in a maze of wonder as to what that repressed and ardent nature would make of life.

The girl's face itself was quiet almost to repression, but her eyes were not to be schooled so easily. In their flash and fire the inner force of her nature spoke out, and told its own tale of rebellion, and its own longings for freedom.

"Are you going to read?" demanded Dolly pettishly. "What can you find in books to be always reading them? I hate books—I always shall."

"You are a foolish little girl," said Sheba calmly, "and you don't know what you are talking about. Books are the food of the mind, just as meat is the food of the body."

"Why do you want to be clever?" asked the child, looking criticizingly at her. "Is it because you're not pretty? You're not, I know. Mamma always says so. You are so dark, and have such a bad skin. You ought to use pistachio-nut powder. She always does. I've seen her put it on. It makes her skin quite nice, though it does get greasy after a while, but it makes you look very nice while it lasts. All the Jewesses use it."

Sheba coloured. "I shouldn't think of using face powder," she said indignantly, "and my looks only concern myself. What do they signify?"

"They will help you to get married," said little Miss Precocity. "Don't you want to get married? All girls do. At the Moss's they are always talking about it, but Sarah and Leah will have money, and you won't. The money is all my papa's, and it will come to me, not to you. I heard him say so, and that's why you ought to get married. I think you had better try the pistachio-nut powder."

"I think you had better go to bed," said Sheba sharply, as she turned her back on her little tormentor, and opened her book in hopes that the hint might be taken.

Miss Dolly turned up her little pert nose with scorn. "Indeed I shall do no such thing. I'm going to wait till they come in from dinner. I want papa to take me to the opera to-morrow night; it's the first night. The company have just arrived from Melbourne, and I want to see the great tenor, Signor Riola. Every one is talking about him. They say he has such a lovely voice. Papa must take me. Wouldn't you like to go? You've never been to the opera yet."

"Yes, I should like to go very much," said Sheba eagerly.

"Oh, well, I'll ask him to take us both," said the young chatterbox. "That's why I'm waiting till after dinner; he's always good-tempered then, especially if he's had that brown sherry, and I told James to be sure and give him that this evening."

"What is the name of the opera?" asked Sheba.

"The 'Prophet,' and I saw a picture of it; a whole lot of people skating on the ice. It was lovely. I wonder what ice is like, real ice, or snow either. I mean to go to England one day and see. Oh, here *is* papa. What a red face he's got. I'm sure he's in a good temper!"

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

### THE "PROPHET."

WHAT an enchantment there is about the very first experience of any special thing.

It is brief—brief as the hue of the rainbow, the bloom of the grape, the sparkle of the dew—but its brevity does not make any the less beautiful or divine to the untired eye, and the untried heart, of youth.

To Sheba no time in her life, before or after this night, had ever, or could ever, hold such magical moments. Anticipation thrilled her with its possible wonders. The stir and flutter of life around her, the beautiful building, the crowds of people, the perpetual noise and movement in the orchestra, were all part and promise of something better yet in store for her. Of music, in its highest and greatest forms, she knew very little, neither had she any very specific talent for it, but any melody that touched her heart, or appealed to her fancy, was capable of giving her the keenest delight, and affecting her with the most intense excitement.

Her cheeks burned like fire, her great deep eyes shone and glowed with a wonderful light as the crashing chords of the overture fell on her ear. She became utterly oblivious of everything and every one around her; an emotion, so strong it was almost pain, thrilled her heart, and the music seemed to speak to her of great and vague and wonderful things, to which, as yet, she could give no name.

Then slowly the curtain drew up, and she felt herself watching breathlessly as it were, the unfolding of a drama. The book in her hand had explained to her the plot and action of the opera, and after a time she grew accustomed to the incongruity of seeing people acting and moving to music, and setting their sentiments and sensations into various rhythms, and changing vagaries of "tempo."

Then suddenly a stillness seemed to fall on the crowded house, and she heard a voice ring out clarion-like above all other voices. She was dimly conscious that a face was looking at her from amidst flashing lights and moving figures, and that as it so looked, and as the clear, rich notes rang out, something familiar and remembered struck suddenly on her heart, and for a moment it seemed to stand still as with the pain of a great shock.

Then it leaped within her breast as if endowed with new, warm life. She felt glad and startled all in one, as she watched thatately grace of motion and listened to that wonderful voice. For before her she saw again the stranger whom she had found half-dying by the Koonga waterfall nearly three years before. She wondered if he would see her—if he would remember—then she felt the blood dye her face with sudden shame even as she thought

Why should he? What had she done for him after all?—and she had been only a child then.

Everything before her grew dim and confused; she lost all sense of what she was looking at; she only thought of that autumn day, she only saw the foam of the falling waters, and stretched herself helplessly at her feet, the figure of a wounded man.

Then the curtain fell ; there was a tumult of applause ; loud cries and shouts filled the house—the curtain was swept aside, and alone, and looking straight at her across the footlights, was that remembered face. His eyes, as they swept across the eager, excited crowd, flashed suddenly on hers. She saw him start and move a step forward, then recovering himself he bowed and drew back, and again the curtain fell.

The blood rushed in a warm swift tide to Sheba's brow.

"He has not—forgotten," she thought in her heart, and even as she thought it, wondered why that heart should feel so glad.

She seemed like one in a dream. She sat quite motionless in that second row of the parquet—her hands clasped, the colour glowing like a rose in her cheek, her great eyes dilated and full of liquid fire. The music thrilled her, the voices and movement and action of the great opera were like the unfolding of a new experience ; but that stately figure in its white robes and with all the tragedy of a doomed life foreshadowing it like a melancholy fate, appealed to her as nothing else appealed, entranced her as nothing else entranced. It was a living, breathing reality to her, from first to last.

From time to time his eyes met hers. She little knew how that absorbed face, those dark, passionate glowing eyes touched him as he looked at them, set in a crowd of other faces. How they puzzled and allured him, like some memory that escapes just as we are about to grasp it. For he recognized nothing of the little bush girl who had saved his life, in this slender white figure with its eloquent face and marvellous eyes. But those eyes touched him and inspired him, and he sang to them, and not to the idle, curious crowd around, and when again and again they called him back, and the great space rang with his name, it was still to that one face he looked and in which he read his best reward.

Then for the last time the curtain fell, and it seemed to Sheba Ormatroyd as if all the world had grown mute and dark and empty.

The whole night long she heard that grand music—she saw that one face in its love, its triumphs, its despair. All her thoughts seemed merged into a vague emotion, and she alternated between the intensity of sorrow, and the exquisite visions of imagined joy.

He seemed to her as a being from another world, as something great and gifted beyond all mere humanity. In her ignorant, youthful, fanciful soul, the fact of his being set apart to interpret that masterpiece of genius seemed to give him a place of standing such as no man could lightly acquire. He was a king in his way, a king by might of genius, and as such she worshipped him reverently and afar.



That she might ever meet him apart from his mimic throne, never speak to him or hear him speak, as on that day when first their lives had crossed, did not occur to her. That singing of his seemed to throb in the air and to echo in her heart, until all the darkness of the night grew glorious with its sounds, and it seemed to her that life could never be wholly sad or hard again, if only sometimes she might see that face, and hear that divine voice. Thoughts and emotions like these robbed her of sleep, and at last she grew impatient of tossing to and fro on her pillow, and rose and dressed herself, and opening her window, looked out on the cool fresh beauty of the early day. Fleecy white clouds were drifting overhead; the sunshine broke slowly forth from amber mists, and all the sky grew clear and radiant.

Sheba turned suddenly away from the window and seized her hat, and then softly opened her door and went down the stairs and through the library into the verandah, and from there made her way with quick elastic steps across the lawn and garden, and in a few minutes was out on the Sydney road.

It was very early, barely five o'clock, and they never breakfasted till nine or half-past nine, so Sheba resolved to walk to the Domain, which was a favourite resort of hers.

The Domain is the Hyde Park of Sydney, but a park where nature has done infinitely more than art. Tropical plants flourish luxuriantly all the year round, magnificent trees tower proudly over the lawns and flower-beds, the winding walks, and varied foliage of perfumed shrubs.

It was so early that Sheba seemed to have it all to herself, and she chose the less frequented walks and alleys, and her buoyant young feet bore her along with that swift and easy grace that comes from unimpeded freedom of limb, and perfect health and youth.

Insensibly the fresh air and the swift exercise calmed the excitement under which she had laboured for all those hours. Her step grew slower, she clasped her hands behind her—a trick of hers when walking alone—and half unconsciously her lips broke into the melody of that beautiful air from the "Prophet," where John of Leyden proclaims his mission to the people, and which she had heard for the first time on the previous evening.

As she was softly singing it to herself, she turned the corner of one of the dusky alleys, and doing so, came suddenly face to face with some one advancing from the opposite direction.

She paused involuntarily, her hands dropped, her startled eyes looked back at two other eyes—laughing, interrogative—that flashed with something of her own surprise, and her own recognition. She saw before her the singer at the opera the previous night.

He had a little child perched on his shoulder, a fair-haired beautiful little creature with great solemn grey eyes, and Sheba in a moment seemed to take in the likeness between them, even as the tall stately figure stepped back with a murmured apology and a keen interrogative glance.

"Pardon me, but have we not met before?" he said with an easy deferential grace that struck Sheba as altogether different to her previous experience of men's manners. "I saw you last night at the opera, and I felt sure I had seen you and spoken to you somewhere, but I could not recollect where. If I am mistaken——"

"No," said Sheba, colouring shyly, "you are not mistaken; it was at the Koonga waterfall—you had met with an accident."

He started; she saw his lips whiten suddenly. "How could I have forgotten?" he said. "Yes, it was you who saved my life—who——" He broke off abruptly and passed his hand across his eyes as if to shut out some horrible sight. "I was not very grateful to you for saving it," he went on, as he looked gravely at the girl's changing face. "I was in as miserable a plight as any human-being could well be. Death was so near that it seemed I might have as well taken the one step more to reach it."

"You should be grateful now that you did not," said Sheba involuntarily, "now you are so great, so famous."

He looked at her as if in wonder, then a smile broke over his face. "Famous," he said, "oh, no, I am only a poor singer. May I ask what time you came into the opera house last night?"

"Just as the orchestra had commenced the overture." "Ah," he said, "I thought so; then you did not hear the apology for Riola. He was ill and I took his part. The manager was nearly distracted . . . I don't believe he imagined I was capable of doing it; but I got through it very well, I flatter myself. At least, my master said so, and he has coached a good many singers in his time. It was really my first appearance, except in trifling things, though I have most operas at my fingers' ends. And the audience," he added laughing, "were not critical."

"I had never heard an opera before," said Sheba in a dreamy voice. "I did not know it was possible for any human voice to mean all that yours meant. I shall never forget it. I seem to know at last what music can be."

"If you loved it," he said, "as I do, you would say that one never quite knows *that*." There are depths and heights which it has never yet achieved. It is like a vista of infinite promise that lures on and on, and at every step the visions grow more beautiful, more alluring, yet even as we grasp them, fade slowly away.

tantalize us with possibilities yet unachieved. But I mustn't let my hobby run away with me! I feel I have never yet properly expressed my sense of your courage and of my obligation. I have often thought of you; but years have changed you so much, that you must forgive my not recognizing you at once."

"I did not expect it," said Sheba, the warm colour ebbing and flowing under her clear brown skin. "Still I am glad you should know I kept my promise."

His brow seemed to darken suddenly. He lifted the child down from his shoulder and set him on the ground.

"And I," he said, "have kept your handkerchief; though every time I looked at it, it brought back one of the darkest and worst hours of my life. It is odd we should meet like this—is it not?"

"Yes," she said simply. "But I always thought we would—some day. Is—that—your little child?" she added with some hesitation.

"Yes," he answered, looking down with sudden pride and tenderness at the quiet little face. "One thing saved out of a wreck of wasted feeling, and mis-spent passion."

"He is like you," said Sheba involuntarily; "but he looks very mournful; is he shy?"

"Not in the least; he will go to you if you desire—go and shake hands with the young lady, Paul," he added, laying his own hand lightly on the little fellow's shoulder.

The child advanced and held out his hand to Sheba, looking at her all the time with gravely solemn eyes that made her feel strange and shy. She took the little hand, but did not stoop to kiss the child as would have seemed natural in an ordinary introduction. Glancing up, she met his father's eyes; again the colour flushed her cheek.

"So you think he looks mournful?" he said. "He is very quiet and old-fashioned, and does not make friends readily. He has always been with me ever since he was a baby, so I suppose that is the reason. But shall we walk on? It is cold standing here."

He turned, and with the child clinging to his hand, walked beside Sheba in the direction she had been taking when they met.

That there was anything strange or unconventional in his doing so, never occurred to the girl. It had all come about so naturally and so easily; there was nothing to cavil at in his manner, or greeting, and he talked to her now as an old friend might have talked, until it seemed to her that he could not possibly be one and the same with that majestic white-robed prophet, who had enthralled all hearts and ears the previous night.

Quite lightly and easily he took up the dropped threads of their last meeting, and wove them into the story of his after experiences. They had been somewhat adventurous, and lightly as he dwelt on them, his descriptions were graphic enough to enchant Sheba's vivid fancy. He had been to the gold diggings at Ballarat, and had a continuous run of ill-luck; but amongst the many strange specimens of all grades of humanity to be found in those regions, he had come across a German professor, who in a sudden attack of gold-fever had left his native land and never ceased to regret it.

"This man," he said lightly, "kept alive my one talent—if I may so call it, and it is to him I owe my success last night. I had always sung—I think I inherited a voice from an ancestress who was an Italian opera singer—but he taught me what was far more important than mere vocalization. When he left the diggings and went to Melbourne, he took an engagement in the orchestra of one of the leading theatres, and I, to please him, studied music as an art, and gained a living by teaching it—as a penance. A short time ago a large company came over from England to give performances of Italian opera, and some of them who had only minor parts, took it into their heads to decamp and visit the diggings. This was my opportunity. My friend and teacher introduced me to the manager, and when he heard me sing he at once engaged me. I under-studied Riola, the tenor; and hence my appearance last night in Sydney in his part. He is still very ill, and to-night I appear in 'Trovatore,' and to-morrow in the 'Huguenots.' You should come to the 'Huguenots.' It is magnificent; some say it is Meyerbeer's finest work. For my part, I like John of Leyden; it suits me, and my old German taught me every bar of the music."

"Is he here in Sydney also?" asked Sheba.

"Yes, we lodge together. He is one of the first violins in the orchestra. Do you live in Sydney now? It was far enough away from there that I first met you."

"I came here nearly two years ago," said Sheba. "My mother married again, and we live at the Glebe now."

"I know it. It is a charming part; much prettier than the town. Do you like Australia—are you a native of it?"

"Yes," she said, "I was born here, but my parents are English. And you are English, are you not?"

His brow clouded suddenly. "Yes," he said briefly, "I have not told you my name yet, have I? The truth is, I have chosen to sink my identity under another—for—special reasons. I am known in the company only as Paul Meredith. Probably, if I

make a hit, I shall have to turn it into Italian, and inform the public that I am Signor Somebody; but at present I keep the English nomenclature, which is partly my own."

"And shall you be a singer always?" asked Sheba.

"I hope so. I like the life. It is triumph, labour, excitement, festival all combined. Favour is capricious, but while it lasts it is a good life, and it is about all I am fit for."

"It is a great thing surely to be fit for," said Sheba. "When I think of you last night holding all that multitude of people breathless——"

He laughed a little bitterly. "And if I died to-morrow not one of them would care," he said. "The fame of a singer lasts but with the breath of his songs, and there are always people to say the new voice eclipses the old. Who cares for the past summer when the glory of the present holds out its promise?"

"But the past," said Sheba timidly, "may have memories that make it sweeter and fairer than the promise of the present."

He looked at her gravely. "True; but public memory is not addicted to sentiment. Only to some rarely-favoured mortal here and there has it been given to reach a height where Fame sits for ever enthroned, and men cannot but see, and hear, and remember!"

Sheba looked suddenly at his face. His eyes were dreamy and absorbed, and gazed far away into the soft blue space of the cloudless heavens. "I think," she said softly, almost reverently, "you might reach it if you would."

His eyes turned to hers—again that look as of repressed pain crossed his face. "No," he said, "never. It is not for me. There is that in my life——"

He broke off abruptly. "I am getting egotistical," he said. "Never mind about my life, or my future. Let us rather talk about yourself and the strangeness of our meeting. I do not even know your name. It would scarcely do to call you by that one you told me of in the bush, for you are a grown-up young lady now."

Sheba laughed. "My name," she said, "is Ormatroyd, but I think no one ever calls me that. I am always Sheba."

"I suppose even I shall always think of you by that name," he said. "And so you kept your promise that day. You told me one of your adventures."

"No one," she said. Then added timidly, "Was it really a fall? You have the mark still on your brow."

"It was not a fall," he said, and his brow darkened. "I was shot at, and left for dead. The traitor was one whom I had trusted, aided, loved—more fool I! Never again in my life would I do that—never, never again!"

"Oh," said Sheba, "that sounds hard."

"It cannot sound," he said, "harder than my life has been made, ere ever I could say it."

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## CHAPTER XXV.

### FROM POETRY TO PROSE.

THEY wandered on here and there through the vast space of the Sydney park, and talked as freely as old friends might have talked. To Sheba those hours were enchanted. She had never met any one who knew so much, or had had such varied experiences. Then it was altogether a new sensation to be treated like a grown-up young lady, and with such consideration and delicacy as belongs only to what now-a-days one seldom meets—a gentleman who *is* a gentleman in thought, and word, and action. He expressed no curiosity at finding her rambling alone in a public park at such an early hour in the morning, but he was a little surprised all the same, and wondered if the girl had quite a happy home. He thought not, for the young face was too sad and thoughtful for her years, and in the deep, dark eyes he seemed to read the troubles of a soul but ill-content.

She interested him—but no more than that. She was not beautiful, and had none of those dainty, feminine, capricious ways which he knew so well, and despised so utterly.

At last it occurred to Sheba that she ought to be turning homewards, and the prose of that fact broke the enchanted spell of their wonderful morning.

Her new friend went out to the gates with her, but then their ways diverged. He held out his hand. "I wonder," he said, "if I might be permitted to call on you at your home."

To Sheba, it was as if a throned monarch had suddenly expressed a wish to visit her. Her face showed only too plainly the delight she felt.

"Oh, do you mean it?" she said eagerly. "How proud, how glad I should be——"

"Would your mother wonder how I made your acquaintance?" he said; "she does not know of the waterfall, though she heard me last night."

Sheba coloured and felt confused. "What shall I tell her?" she asked.

He answered that question by another: "Is she at all like you?"

"I—I think not," said the girl wonderingly. "She always tells me I am utterly unlike her, but I am sure she would be delighted to know you. She admired your singing so much."

"Oh!" he said. "I know what *that* means. Never mind, I will get an introduction to her. We are sure to meet soon, and it's as well to observe *les convenances*."

He released her hand after one quick look into the deep, soft eyes that met his own so frankly.

Then Sheba glanced down at the child. "Won't he be tired?" she said. "He has walked a long way."

"Oh, he is used to that," said his father. "He goes everywhere with me. He is quite a well-known character at the theatre and he never troubles any one. Do you, Paul?"

The little fellow looked up at the handsome down-bent face with such an expression of adoring love that it brought tears to Sheba's eyes. He made no answer in words, only took his father's hand in his, and mutely pressed it to his lips.

And as Sheba went homewards through the glow and radiance of the bright young day she saw that scene repeat itself again and again. What love, what perfect confidence existed between those two! "Oh," cried her longing heart, "will no one ever love me like—that?"

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They were all at breakfast when she arrived. Mrs. Levison looked up impatiently as she entered the room.

"Late again," she said. "I wish, if you are so fond of morning walks, you would learn to come home punctually. And I wish you would give up that habit of rambling about by yourself; it was all very well in the bush, but it doesn't do here in a town. It is not—not ladylike."

"Sheba doesn't care about being ladylike," piped Miss Dolly's shrill voice; "she told me so, and she says she won't go to a ball if she has to wear a crinoline!"

Mr. Levison burst out laughing, and under cover of his mirth Sheba drank her coffee—caring very little for the remarks or the laughter. She was quite happy; they could not spoil her golden morning, or the memory of last night.

"Well," said her step-father, when his amusement at his daughter's cleverness had in some degree subsided, "and what did you think of the opera, eh? Rather a decent singer that tall chap, wasn't he? Rum idea, though, for a man to paint his face, and dress up in all sorts of ridiculous garments, and shout away at the top of his voice for two or three hours. To me opera is

always idiotic. The idea of singing out to a crowd of people that you love a girl, or are going to fight your rival, or poison your mother-in-law, or march to battle, or assassinate your king—down-right nonsense, you know. Such stuff shouldn't be allowed."

Sheba's face grew scarlet. Talk of two sides to a question—here was indeed the prose to her poetic idyl. Before she could give vent to her indignation, however, Mrs. Levison chimed in:

"You talk very absurdly," she said. "Opera is quite one of *the* things of fashionable life. Royalty has always patronized it, and in fact the London season wouldn't *be* the season without the Italian opera. I am only too pleased to think Sydney is waking up to the fact of its importance."

"Oh," said Mr. Levison, "if it pleases you, all right. I don't object to all their fal-lals, and tra-la-la's. I only said what it sounded like to me. I'd a thousand times sooner see a good play with a thundering murder in it."

"Hand me over the newspaper, Sheba," said Mrs. Levison languidly. "I want to see what they say of the performance. I'm sure to be asked what I thought of Riola's singing, so I must read the criticism."

"Won't it be better to say what you *did* think of it," said Sheba with her usual downright injudiciousness. "The critic's opinion isn't yours."

"It will be mine when I've read it," said her mother sharply. "It is always best to trust to the judgment of people who understand these matters. Now a musical critic is paid for his work, and I suppose he understands what he undertakes. Therefore his opinion is useful—in a measure."

"It is only the opinion of one man," persisted Sheba. "Why should it be set up as better than that of all the hundreds who heard the music last night? If they hadn't liked it, or appreciated it, they would never have applauded as they did. They had no critic to tell them when to do so, and when not——"

"Now, Sheba," snapped her mother, "for gracious sake don't begin your arguments. You are perfectly dreadful. It isn't right or—or decent for a girl of your age to be always airing her own opinions, and before people older and more experienced than herself. I never dreamt of such a thing when I was a girl."

"But what she said wasn't bad," chuckled Mr. Levison, rubbing his fat, coarse hands together; "'pon my word, it wasn't bad. I really think she had the best of you—upon my word I do."

"Oh," said Mrs. Levison, rising with dignity. "Of course, if I am to be insulted at my own table by my own daughter and my



own husband, it is best for me to retire. Come, Dolly, my pet, I don't want your young ideas to be contaminated."

"I don't care," said Dolly; "I want to stay with my papa, and you are not nearly so kind to me when I am with you alone as you are when he's there."

Mrs. Levison retreated precipitately after that speech. She did not tell Miss Dolly not to argue with her elders. Her father was so delighted with her sharpness that he took her on his knee and gave her a new bright half-crown as a reward.

"She's my own child, all over," he exclaimed, chuckling audibly. "She knows what two and two make, don't you, puss; and how did *you* like the opera, eh?"

"It was very funny," said the child. "I liked the skating though, and I liked the man in the white cloak; I thought he was lovely. I'd like to know him. Why don't you ask him to come here?"

Sheba felt her face flushing hotly.

"Ask him—here," said Mr. Levison; "why, what an odd fancy. What should we do with him? A dressed-up stage doll, hired for so much a night. I should have to pay him if he came, and I can get much more entertaining people for nothing."

Sheba sprang to her feet. The vulgarity and pomposity of that speech fired her with indignation.

"I think," she said proudly, "you scarcely know you are talking of a gentleman."

"Hoity-toity!" exclaimed her step-father. "And pray what do you know of the matter? *Gentleman*, indeed. As if a gentleman would do such a thing as turn stage-puppet, and squeak out so many tunes for so many guineas a night. That shows how much you know about the matter. Dolly could tell you better than that, eh, Dolly? You know what makes a gentleman, don't you?"

"Money," said Miss Dolly confidently. "Lots of money; millions of money, eh, papa?"

"Of course," he said, laughing heartily, "money—that's power—and rank—and success now-a-days. Never you marry any one who hasn't got it."

"I should think not indeed!" exclaimed the child, tossing her fair cloud of hair with scorn. "But Sheba is so old-fashioned and silly. She told me the other day she hated the very name of wealth, and that all rich people seemed made up of vulgarity and pretence!"

"Oh, indeed, young madam, is that your opinion?" sneered Mr. Levison, putting down the child and rising from the break-

fast table. "Then let me tell you it is damned ungrateful, to say the least of it, to make such remarks about people but for whose charity you would have been a beggar! Yes, a beggar. Here you've lived and been fed, and clothed, and kept in idleness and luxury, and all the thanks you give is to make remarks like those behind my back!"

Sheba grew white as death. The child's statement was true, but she had made it more in reference to Mr. Levison's circle of friends, than himself.

"I should like to know who *you* are to give yourself such airs," continued her step-father, with rising anger. "I've had about enough of them, I can tell you. If you were independent it might be excused, but when I pay for the very clothes on your back, the very food you eat——"

"Stop," cried Sheba passionately, "you needn't say any more. You know it was no wish of mine to live under your roof. I only obeyed my mother's commands. After such an expression of your views, it is scarcely necessary for me to say I will not accept another favour! I have always wished to be independent. I am young and strong, and I can work for my own bread. I will do so at the very earliest opportunity; I will not live under your roof an hour longer than is necessary."

His loud contemptuous laughter rang out and drowned her words.

"Work . . . *you*, oh Lord, that is a joke! Why, you don't know anything that's useful; you are always dreaming over your poetry, and such like rubbish. That sort of thing's no good in the colonies let me tell you. If you could cook, and scour, and wash, you might have a chance of earning a livelihood, but with such trumpery talents as yours—pooh—you'd best go on the stage and paint your face and spout poetry. Perhaps this Signor--Signor Propheto, or whatever his name is, will help you."

Sheba stayed to hear no more, but swept out of the room, proud and indignant as a young goddess.

Often as she and her step-father had come into collision in matters of opinion, he had never before expressed himself so coarsely. She felt stung to the very core of her being, as she thought that it was to this man she owed food, clothing, shelter. One by one his words came back to her as she paced to and fro her room, and every recurrence seemed only to bring a deeper disgust and a clearer meaning.

"I will not live on his money any longer," she cried passionately. "I *will* not. He says I cannot work . . . well, we shall see."

She leant her head on her hands, and for a few moments gave

herself up to thought. Something, some memory, vague and misty, was floating through her brain, the recollection of some advertisement she had seen and noticed ; but where was it ? Ah, in the paper of the previous day. She must get it.

As she moved to the door she heard quick steps in the passage beyond. She looked out, and saw Dolly.

"Dolly," she cried eagerly, "come here. I want you to fetch me yesterday's *Herald* from the library."

"Why don't you go yourself?" cried the child pertly. "I am not going to run your messages ; you were very rude to my papa, and he has gone away in a very bad temper. You are a silly. He won't give you a new dress now for the ball on the 20th."

"I don't want his dresses, or his presents," exclaimed Sheba wrathfully. "You are just like him. All you think of is money ; it is the one god that all you Jews worship. Much good may it do you when you come to die !"

Dolly stared at her.

"Oh, you *are* in a temper," she said. "I will tell mamma to come to you—you shouldn't get into tempers. It's very wicked, and you do look so ugly !"

But Sheba had lost all patience ; she gave the child a stinging box on the ears which sent her howling off to her step-mother's boudoir, and then she went to the library herself and sought out the *Sydney Herald* containing the advertisement she had noticed on the previous day.

She found it at last and sat down to read it over carefully. "A gentleman wishes to engage a daily governess for his little boy, aged four. One who would accompany him in his walks, and be with him from the hours of ten to five. Apply personally, or by letter to Herr Franz Müller, 18, Fort Street, Sydney, any day this week. Salary—£30."

Sheba seized pen and paper and immediately dashed off an application for the post. £30 a year meant independence. Surely she could provide her own food and clothes with that, even if she must live under this hated roof. But then she suddenly remembered the Saxtons were coming over to Sydney very shortly, and perhaps they would let her board with them. If so—

Her train of thought was here roughly interrupted. Her mother entered, followed by Dolly, who was weeping spasmodically.

"What is this I hear?" exclaimed Mrs. Levison stormily. "You have insulted my husband, you have struck this poor little child. What do you mean by such conduct ; are you out of your senses ?"

"Your husband insulted me," cried Sheba. "He called me a beggar, fed by his charity."

"And so you are," said her mother in a fury. "So you are, and you haven't even the grace to be civil, or behave decently to your benefactor."

Sheba's face grew cold and hard. "I came here," she said, "at your desire and because I thought it my duty to obey you. But I will not live under the roof of a man who flings his charity at me as if I were a starving dog. I have borne the life here as patiently as I could; but to-day he bade me earn my own bread, and I will take him at his word. As soon as ever I can get a situation——"

"Situation!" sneered Mrs. Levison, "the idea of your getting a situation! Why, you don't know a single useful thing. If you want to be independent you had better apply for a servant's place. It's about all you're fit for."

"Perhaps," said Sheba proudly, "I am a better judge of what I am fit for than—you; you know very little of me, really. You never cared, and you care less now than even you used to do."

"How—how *dare* you say such things!" cried her mother furiously, stung by an unpalatable truth. "Care, indeed! I have cared a great deal too much for a selfish, ungrateful girl who has been nothing but a worry and anxiety to me, ever since she was born!"

"I will relieve you of both," said Sheba coldly, "as soon as ever I can get something to do. I have just applied for a situation as governess; if I get it——"

Mrs. Levison fairly screamed with laughter, and Dolly echoed it. "If you get it; I should think it was 'if' indeed!"

The girl moved a little away. Her eyes were dark with anger and wounded pride—her lips quivered slightly.

"I may get it," she said, "and if I do, I will not live under Mr. Levison's roof another hour."

"Oh! isn't she a silly," piped Dolly in her shrill little voice, "isn't she a silly, silly," when she might have dresses, and to dance to and fro, clapping her fat hands. "I shall be so glad if you go," she said; "papa will give me the dresses instead, and he won't be half so cross as he is now. You always make him cross, you are so proud and so cold and stuck up. He often says he'd never have married your mother, if he had known what you were like."

Mrs. Levison grew scarlet. "Be quiet, Dolly," she said, for there was something in Sheba's white disgusted face that frightened

her a little. Before she could say any more, the girl took up the letter she had written and left the room.

Mrs. Levison threw herself down on the couch and began to cry. She was furious with Sheba for making all this disturbance. Things had been going on so smoothly, and now, here they were all upset just through one of her tempers, as if her life was not hard enough without all these disturbances. Mr. Levison was not a bad husband, but then he was certainly not a gentleman, and he did grate upon her occasionally; and then he knew such a lot of horrid Jews and he would insist upon her asking them to dinner, and they were so dreadful, especially the women, who powdered their faces till they looked like clown's masks, and dressed so loudly and always would play cards for money, which was quite against her principles, more especially as she always lost whenever she did it.

So she lay there crying and fretting and grumbling until she had worked up a headache, and then took herself off to her own room and had the blinds drawn down and steeped herself in eau-de-Cologne, and sal volatile, and agreed that if ever there was a Christian martyr of the nineteenth century, that martyr existed in her own proper person.

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

### SHEBA RESOLVES TO BE INDEPENDENT.

IN a large room somewhat barely furnished, but light and airy and with one large window commanding a view of the harbour with its fairy islands, and passing vessels, an old man sat at a table copying music. He had a fine face, framed in by long iron-grey hair, which gave him a somewhat *bizarre* appearance. He was writing busily, and humming a tune from time to time, when a knock at the door interrupted him.

"*Herein!*—come in, I mean," he cried with a strong German accent.

"A young lady, sir, to see you," said a voice—the voice of the domestic of the lodgings recently taken by Herr Franz Müller, and Paul Meredith, of the Italian Opera Co.

"A young lady!" He lifted his head and tossed back the long loose hair. "*So!* . . . Very possibly; show her in, my good *Mädchen*, show her in."

The girl stepped aside, and in the doorway stood a tall and slender figure—the figure of a girl—who advanced slowly and

somewhat hesitatingly into the long, low room. She had a letter in her hand.

"Am I speaking to Herr Franz Müller?" she asked.

"But certainly, *mein Fräulein*; to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I saw your advertisement in the *Sydney Herald* of yesterday," she said gravely and earnestly; "I wrote an answer to it, but on second thoughts it seemed to me I had better come myself; then I should know if I was likely to suit. It is for your little boy, I suppose, you require a governess——"

"I? *Lieber Gott!* No, I never had any little boys. I am a wise man. I meddle not with your sex, charming as they are. No, I spend my time in writing music that is for the future, and histories, that are of the follies of life."

"But," stammered the girl, "the advertisement—was that not yours?"

"Oh, yes; but certainly, that is all right; the little boy—he is my friend's. He lives with us. He is too much alone, *der kleine Engel!* and he gets too old-a-fashion—what you call? We want a lady who will teach him and companion him. You think you will do for that—yes?"

"I should like to try," said the girl earnestly. "I have never taught before, but I am fond of children."

"*Gut!*" said the old German, surveying her deliberately, "your face speaks well . . . you would be kind and patient, *nicht wahr?* He is a peculiar child . . . sensitive so to be scarcely believed, and quick, clever—oh, amazing! One thing, he is not to be taught any religion—none of the faiths and dogmas that so confound and bemuddle the brains of childhood and youth. *That* his father insists upon. For the rest, you tell him the alphabet, and reading, and to make the letters and strokes—what you call pot-hooks—you take him for walks, you tell him pretty stories, you try and make him less old-fashion, more of a child, yes . . . you would do this?"

"Certainly," said the girl; "I think my duties would be very easy. Do you—do you think his father would engage me?"

"His father gave me permission to engage whom I think fit," said the old man. "He knows I have a great gift to read character. I am sure, *mein Fräulein*, you would do. I have seen one other lady, but she seemed old and cross—what you call 'old-maid-gone-wrong.' I do not like her. But you I like; wait—you shall see the child himself. You shall know if he likes you."

He raised his voice and called twice, "Paul—Paul!" A door opened, communicating with another room, and a little boy came

in. As the girl saw him she started, and her face grew pale. "Paul," she said . . . "you! Is it possible—?"

"You know him!" cried the old man in astonishment; "how comes that?"

"I know his father," cried the girl, her eyes sparkling, her whole face lighting up. "He is the child of Mr. Paul Meredith, the singer."

"*Ja!* that is so"—excitedly; "and you know him—you have heard him—is he not great? He is my pupil—my art's prize and crown. To him shall it be given to revive all that is best and purest in style and method of singing. It has suffered much, that pure, good, perfect method; but he has it—he will be great, famous. Oh, yes, I prophesy it, and I am not mistaken, never. Look," he went on excitedly, "look there—and there—and there!—all the papers—all the press—all praising, extolling him. Not that critics concern me much—I know more than any critic knows—but they lead foolish people, and it is well they have their little say. So they say it of him, and I know he will be great if he choose—all the world may say so yet; his fame is all to come, all to come, but I shall have made it. Ah, how I run on. I forget. Here, *kleiner Junge*, come forward and speak to this lady, who is so good as to say she will teach you all a young gentleman should know."

The child advanced. He looked somewhat wistfully up at the tall figure, and dark grave face.

"Are you going to teach me?" he said. "I shall not mind you. You will not be cross."

"He is a tender little soul," said the old German. "His father spoils him—they are all in all, those two. It is odd to care so much for a child . . . a little fragile bit of clay, that the merest accident would destroy. Some day I will write a history of the affections!" He leant back in his chair and looked speculatively at the two faces from under his thick grey brows. "They understand one another," he said to himself. "It is good; she will do."

"What is your name, *mein Fräulein?*" he suddenly asked.

The girl turned. "Sheba Ormatroyd," she said. He wrote it down on a piece of paper. "Age?" he asked, "or shall we leave that out; you are, if anything, almost too young. Address?—for I must communicate with you when I have seen my friend. Thank you. Salary—does that suit?"

"Yes," said Sheba, colouring. "I thought—it—it seemed to me a great deal for so little work."

"Oh," he said laughing, "you should not ever underrate your-

self. My friend thought it not enough. And when could you begin?"

"To-morrow, if you desire it," said Sheba.

"*Ja wohl.* To-morrow let it be. And the religion . . . you will remember. No prayers, no hymns, no exciting nonsense. His mind is to be left free, till he can himself make his conclusions."

"I will teach him nothing," said the girl earnestly, "that his father does not wish."

"*Gut,* then I need not longer detain you. You shall hear by letter to-morrow morning what time to come. I hope we shall be very good friends, *mein Fräulein.*"

He held out his large, ink-stained hand, and the girl gave him hers frankly and cordially. She seemed to tread on air. She could scarcely believe she had really succeeded in obtaining employment so easily. What a change in her life. How it seemed to lift her above and beyond that petty, narrow-minded, home-circle, every element of which was antagonistic to her. She trod the streets with swift elastic steps. The radiant air, the bright sunshine, seemed to enter into her very spirit and make her bright and radiant too. The long walk home seemed as nothing to her.

When she reached Oaklands luncheon was over, and Dolly was sitting in the verandah, stuffing herself with macaroons and sweetmeats.

"Where have you been?" she cried as Sheba appeared. "How hot you look, and how dusty your dress is. There has been a visitor here for you. He was so disappointed you were out. I talked to him for a long time, and I told him how ill-tempered you were, and how you quarrelled with papa and boxed my ears, and were so rude to your mother that she was quite ill, and had gone to bed. He said he was very grieved to hear it."

"You certainly are a charming child," said Sheba, looking at the card Dolly held out to her. Her brow clouded as she read the name, "the Revd. Noel Hill." How unfortunate that he should have called to-day, of all days.

"He was very nice-looking," went on the irrepressible Dolly. "Too short for my taste, though; I like tall men. I kept him here a long time. He said I was very entertaining."

"No doubt," said Sheba, turning away. "If you have only dwelt enough on my iniquities, you couldn't have helped being—that."

"Oh, I told him lots of other things too," said Dolly cheerfully; "all papa's business and how much money he makes, and



about the Moss's, and how mean they are. It was only when he asked how I liked you, that I told him about this morning. You shouldn't have boxed my ears, and then I'd have said you were as nice as nice." But Sheba had gone.

Luncheon was still on the table, but she only cut a slice of bread and drank a glass of water. Even that seemed to her bitter and distasteful. The bread of charity, her step-father had called it, and her mother had said he was right. Well, to-night she could tell him she would be independent of that charity. She would buy her own food, and her own clothes, even if she had still to accept the shelter of his roof; £30 a year would scarcely stretch to board and lodging as well.

They had laughed at her—they had defied her—they had said she was unfit for anything but dreams and poetry, but she would show them their mistake.

Then her eyes fell on the card she held. She wondered what Noel Hill would think of her, what he would say when he heard what she had done. Somehow she felt instinctively he would not approve of it; he would tell her she had been too impetuous, that she should not set up her own will against her mother's.

"Ah, but he doesn't know what my life has been," she thought, as the tears welled one by one to the great dark eyes. "I have tried to endure, I have tried to be patient, but there is a limit. I cannot bear to be told I am a useless expense, living on charity. Even he would excuse me if he knew what Mr. Levison said to-day."

She remained quietly in her room till nearly dinner time, then she went to her mother's boudoir and knocked at the door. Mrs. Levison was going out to a dinner party, and was just arranging the dress she intended to wear.

Her face clouded as she saw Sheba.

"I hope," she said, "you have not come to make me any more scenes. I have been quite ill all day, and I don't want to be worried again."

"I have only come," said Sheba quietly, "to say I have found a situation as daily governess, and am going to enter on my duties to-morrow."

Mrs. Levison dropped the dress, and stared at her. "Are you mad?" she cried. "Do you really suppose I shall allow you to do such a thing—to disgrace me in *my* position by going out working like a drudge! Don't talk such ridiculous nonsense."

"Mother," said the girl passionately, "is surely time you tried to understand me a little. You chose to marry this man, and you have forced me to live here under his roof for nearly two

years. But when he tells me to my face that I have no claim on his courtesy as a gentleman, or his relationship as—your husband—he shows me very plainly that I must make my future independent of what he calls his charity."

"Now, Sheba," interrupted her mother, "I want no grand speeches, and no arguments. It is sufficient for me to say I won't be disgraced in the eyes of my friends, and the society in which I mix. You were very rude to Mr. Levison this morning, and you had one of your usual quarrels. It is nothing new. You have made them up before, and you will make this one up also. Just tell him you were sorry you were so hasty, and he's too good-natured to think any more about it."

"Never!" said Sheba, setting her lips in firm determination. "I will never tell him that! He has insulted me too deeply."

"Insulted you—stuff and nonsense!" exclaimed her mother pettishly; "one would think you were a queen to hear you talk. Now, run away, I don't want to hear any more, and it takes me quite an hour to dress."

Sheba stamped her foot impatiently on the floor. Her temper was getting the better of her again. "You care more for your dress than for your own flesh and blood!" she said, "and as for the disgrace you speak of—it is not for the way it concerns me, or yourself individually, that you mind it—but only because your friends will say: 'How can the Mrs. Levison let her daughter go out as a governess?'"

The truth was so true that it stung Mrs. Levison to fury. "You may do what you like," she said, "and go where you like, so only you take your hateful presence away! I am beginning to detest the very sight of you. If you want to be a governess, go and be one by all means—only you're not to stay under my roof and disgrace me! Take yourself away altogether—and when you're tired of your folly, perhaps you'll crawl back and beg for the shelter and the kindness you now scorn!"

"Hoity-toity—what's all this row about?" exclaimed a voice in the doorway. Mr. Levison was standing there, having also returned early from town, to dress for the dinner party. "Hasn't young madam got out of her tantrums yet?" he asked.

"She says she has taken a situation," cried Mrs. Levison, nearly weeping with shame and vexation. "You've driven her to it—and you know she's as obstinate as a mule—and what will people say—such a disgrace . . . and just as I was going to bring her out too!"

"Taken a situation," repeated Mr. Levison, thrusting his hands in his pockets and surveying his obdurate step-daughter

with a sneer. "Well, I'm deuced glad to hear it! What sort of one—ballet-girl—shop-girl—eh?"

"Daily governess!" sobbed his wife; "only think of it! I shouldn't mind if it was 'resident'—but daily—it is shameful, wicked of you, to do such a thing, Sheba."

"You told me to do it yourself this very morning," said the girl coldly. "I only took you at your word."

"Pooh!" cried Mr. Levison, "let her go . . . let her do what she likes. Pride must have a fall, you know. She'll soon get sick of it and come back. Now take yourself off, young madam," he continued coarsely, "dinners won't wait; and the Abrahams always give jolly good spreads. I'm not going to miss this for any of your tantrums."

Sheba only looked at him as he stood there, jingling the coins in his pocket, swelling with visible self-importance as a wealthy man going to be wealthily entertained.

Then she turned to her mother. "I have told you," she said, "that I begin work to-morrow—do not forget that I *mean* it."

"Oh—do what you like," snapped Mrs. Levison, with a feverish glance at the clock, which warned her of the lessening time for her toilet; "do what you like. I wash my hands of you! I'm sure you'll come to a bad end some day."

And with those words ringing in her ears as her only blessing, Sheba Ormatroyd set out on her career of independence.

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

### "WHAT AM I TO DO WITH SHEBA?"

THE first post next morning brought her a letter. She felt instinctively it was from Paul Meredith, even before she saw the signature at the end of the second page:

"DEAR MISS ORMATROYD," it began, "My friend Müller tells me, that you replied personally yesterday to our advertisement. I could scarcely credit this, knowing the position your step-father holds in Sydney, and what a wealthy man he is. Are you quite sure you are not acting upon some impulse, which you may speedily regret? The honour of your companionship for my little boy is one I would highly appreciate, but I must ask you to consider the matter carefully. Perhaps you would prefer to talk it over with me. In that case I shall be at your service between

the hours of ten and twelve to-morrow (Thursday) morning. Meanwhile, with best regards and wishes,

"Believe me,

"Yours most sincerely,

"PAUL MEREDITH."

Sheba read the letter with mingled feelings. It seemed to her cold and formal. Perhaps her new-found friend did not approve of her as a teacher. Perhaps her hopes were destined to be rudely disappointed. Her excited and feverish delight at the prospect of her new duties was suddenly checked. The old life of repression and tyranny seemed once more closing around her.

In the midst of her troubled thoughts, she heard the breakfast bell ring. She put the letter in her pocket and went slowly downstairs. Mr. Levison and Dolly were at the table. Her mother was too fatigued to appear.

Her step-father looked up as she entered.

"Well, Miss Governess, I thought you were off. May I ask what sort of place this is you have taken, and where it is?"

"It is to teach a little boy—the only child of a widowed gentleman," said Sheba coldly. "I am going there from ten till four every day, and I am to have £30 a year. I propose to keep £15 a year for my clothes and pay you the rest for my board and room here until I can make other arrangements."

Mr. Levison fairly shouted with laughter.

"Upon my word," he said, "it is the best joke I've heard for many a long day. You certainly have taken me at my word. Well, I'll give you a month of it, and if by that time you don't feel inclined to come off your stilts, and be sensible again, I'll have nothing more to do with you. I wonder what your friends the Saxtons will say when they come over. They'll be here next week. You certainly are the next best possibility to a fool, that ever wore petticoats!"

Sheba drank a cup of milk and ate a small piece of bread, then rose from the table, and without deigning a reply to Mr. Levison's observations she left the room.

A few minutes afterwards she set out for the long walk to the town. The thrill of excitement had returned. Every nerve was strung to high tension—her pulses quivered—her heart beat quick. The thought of seeing Paul Meredith, as he called himself, was uppermost in her mind. She would tell him why she had done this, and if he disapproved of her as a teacher, well, then she must try somewhere else—at a school perhaps—or advertise for herself. But she scarcely thought he would refuse

ner when he heard all, when he knew that she *must* get work—somewhere.

As she mounted the stairs again to the room she had been shown into on the previous day, her courage began to fail. The colour left her face, and when her timid knock brought forth the gruff "*Hercin*," from the lips of the old German, she felt ready to sink into the floor, instead of walking across it. They were all there—the child, and Herr Müller, and the singer with his beautiful face and strange sad eyes.

He sprang up as he saw her—and when she felt the clasp of his hand and saw the eager inquiry of his face, her fears vanished.

"So you have come," he said. "I am glad of that—but how is this, Miss Ormatroyd—what has happened since we walked in the park together two mornings back? I looked upon you as a rich, fashionable young lady—and now I hear——"

"Yes, it is quite true," said Sheba. "My step-father and I have quarrelled, and I have resolved to earn my own living. When I applied for the situation I saw advertised, I of course had not the slightest idea to whom I was applying—but if you think I should suit——"

A slightly humorous smile touched the singer's lips.

"Suit—nay, it is too much honour—you are a great deal too clever, if anything, to teach babies, but I am engaged so much, and my little Paul——"

The child came forward as he heard his name. "I like her, my father," he said quietly; "let her stay."

"There, you see!" laughed Meredith, "your fate is decided. You will find him very old-fashioned. It is Müller's fault. He has made him half a German."

"It is so," nodded the old man, "and quite right, *nicht wahr?* It was as easy to learn two languages as one. There, let the *Fräulein* take a seat, and we will tell her about ourselves. We are queer folk and she must take us as she finds us."

Sheba smiled, and took the offered chair. Her shyness had vanished. She felt quite at her ease now, with this tall and stately man with his grave handsome face and courtly manners, who was still to her a being apart from ordinary manhood.

"And so," said the old German after awhile, when he had rambled on about music and books, and their Bohemian life, and Paul's magnificent voice, till he was tired, "and so, *mein Fräulein*, you have not a happy home. That is sad, for you are so young. But take heart, things may be better. It is a grand thing, 'hope.' I say so always to Paul when he is what you call

down-in-the-mouth. '*Mein Freund*,' I say, 'hope—do not let it go—there is always the chance of things to get better; so hope.'

Sheba smiled somewhat sadly. "I am afraid," she said, "there is not much chance of things getting better with me, but if I can only work and make my own living, I shall be content."

"What did your step-father say when you told him your intention?" asked the singer, looking at her gravely.

"He did not believe me, I think," said the girl, colouring shyly, "and this morning he said he would give me a month, and he was sure at the end of it I should be glad to throw up my duties. You see," she added with unconscious pathos, "he knows nothing of my nature at all. He does not understand that if I begin a thing, I must carry it out."

"I am afraid," said Paul Meredith gently, "that you have had rather a hard life. Why did your mother not interfere?"

"She thinks I am very ungrateful," said Sheba, "not to be content with food, and clothes, and shelter. Perhaps I am . . . only it is the way a thing is given that makes one ungrateful—or the reverse . . . and Mr. Levison has always made me feel I have no right to anything in his house."

"Well," said the singer thoughtfully, "it is strange that fate should direct you here. But as Müller says, we will be good to you, Bohemians as we are, and I hope your pupil will not prove troublesome. He is obedient to me always, but then he has the weakness to be very fond of me; childhood is an irrational thing, you know."

"It is a surprising weakness—very," said Franz Müller dryly, "and you do not share or encourage it—no; *you* are not irrational!"

"In this instance I fear I am," he said with a smile at Sheba. "The child is the dearest thing in life to me, and I can give no reason except that—it is so."

"Isn't that the only reason love ever allows us?" said Sheba, lifting her great sad eyes to his face. "I never heard of any other. I don't see that any other is needed."

"Perhaps you are right," he said abruptly; "I won't go deeper into the matter at present. I have to run away now, but I must say I am glad you are to cast your lot in with us. I am sure we shall be friends. We are both unhappy—we have both a grudge against fate. Who knows—we may do each other good!"

"Just what I expressed to the *Fräulein* yesterday," interrupted Müller. "She will find us always the same. We like her, and we shall I hope be friends."

The tears rose to Sheba's eyes. "I hope so," she said earnestly. "I have so few friends."

So the compact was sealed and she entered upon her new duties.

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The week that followed this interview was a very hard and stormy one for Sheba. Hex was furious when he heard what she had done—her mother scarcely spoke to her, and her step-father sneered and scoffed at her, at every available opportunity.

Sheba's impulsive action had annoyed him excessively—it made him look mean and tyrannical—and he was afraid his friends would think him so. The girl's firmness, her quiet *hauteur* and indifference to his remarks angered him still further, and by degrees his dislike to her became a settled animosity, and he delighted in prophesying all sorts of evil and misfortune for her future, as natural results of such an obstinate and headstrong temper.

Noel Hill called again, and not succeeding in seeing the girl, he wrote to her and begged her to tell him her reasons for this strange step on her part. Sheba did so, and also wrote in a similar manner to Aunt Allison, who she felt sure would understand her better than any one else.

In this she was right, for Miss Saxton saw clearly that the proud independent spirit of the girl could not but revolt against the constant humiliation of her position. She had, in fact, scarcely expected her to bear it as long as she had done. She wrote to her at great length—neither approving nor blaming, but giving her much judicious counsel, and saying the letter would be speedily followed by a visit, as they were all going to Queensland and would stop at Sydney for a week or two on their way.

So Sheba went steadily to and fro, and felt so happy and so busy that she paid little heed to the growing discomforts of her home life. Her new friends charmed her more and more. The courtesy and chivalry of the one, the quaint humour and the vast amount of erudition possessed by the other, the docility and intelligence of her little pupil, were all novel and delightful experiences.

She did not see Paul Meredith very often, but the old German was constantly in the room when she gave her lessons, and even sometimes accompanied them on their walks.

On one of these occasions her mother passed them in the carriage, and turned away in shuddering horror from the sight of that queer-looking figure. She had heard from Mr. Levison that Sheba's employer was a widower, with a little boy, and naturally put this Bohemian-looking personage with his long hair and wide, slouched hat, down as that individual.

“Well, she has made a queer choice, I must say,” she thought. “I expect she will soon get tired of it.”

But little as she understood this troublesome daughter of hers, she knew that her resolves were apt to be very resolute indeed, and she felt somewhat uncomfortable as she thought of those two past years, and how little she had interested herself in anything that Sheba did, or cared for.

She leant back in her luxurious carriage, but somehow the cushions were not so soft, or the springs so easy as usual.

"I wish," she said suddenly to herself, "that I could get her married. What a comfort it would be!"

She ran over in her mind's eye all the eligible bachelors she knew, wishing they did not comprehend quite so many Cohens, and Moss's, and Leveys. Sheba would never look at a Jew she was afraid; even if he had forsworn Synagogue, and "kosher meat." Then of Christians there were so few well off, with the exception of one or two descendants of convict families, who, as far as money went, were people of the greatest importance, and regulated legislature and worked zealously for the country, to which they owed their wealth.

But Sheba had no dower, and, in her mother's eyes, no beauty, and was hardly likely to commend herself to the eyes of such magnates as these.

"She is not the style to suit any of them," thought Mrs. Levison in despair, "with her dowdy dresses, and her great eyes, and her coldness and self-confidence."

It was rather an odd summing-up of Sheba's mental and physical attractions, but no doubt it was correct, or at least her mother thought so.

"I think," she said, "I will go and see Miss Saxton. Perhaps she can advise me."

So she pulled the check-string, and had herself driven to the hotel where the Saxtons were staying, and, finding Aunt Allison at home, she straightway poured out to her all her grievances and difficulties respecting Sheba.

Miss Saxton listened, half pained, half amused.

"Really," she said at last, "I do not see why you should object so much to the girl's desire for independence. Your husband is to blame, if any one, for telling her she was a dependant on his charity. No girl of spirit would like that. And what does it matter about her teaching if none of your fashionable friends know it? Some of them are not even aware that you have a daughter."

Mrs. Levison coloured beneath the pistachio-nut powder, which of late had to be applied more lavishly than of yore, to hide the ravages of time, which she called—worry.



"Sheba would never go anywhere with me," she said sulkily. "And she hated driving so I was obliged to take Dolly." Then, after a short pause, she burst out petulantly: "I wish to goodness I could marry her to some one."

Miss Saxton started. "Marry her," she repeated. "She is far too young—and then she would not be easy to please. If she loves, it will be no light matter."

"Loves!" broke in Mrs. Levison with a slighting laugh. "My dear Miss Saxton, do not let us talk of such an everyday matter as marriage, as though we were two schoolgirls. Love! Why, in a year what does it signify if you were in love with your husband? I have been married twice, and I can thankfully lay my hand on my heart, and say that neither sentiment nor romance inspired either of the marriages, or led me to expect more of men than common-sense shows us they possess."

"You are fortunate," said Aunt Allison dryly. "Some women are not so—sensible. I think, too, it is only natural for a young girl to look upon love as the prelude to wedded life. Otherwise it is such a cold, sordid, give-and-take business."

Mrs. Levison began dimly to perceive that she had come to the wrong person for sympathy. Her brow clouded, she answered with some asperity, "For goodness' sake don't encourage Sheba in any of these ideas, she is quite had enough already."

"I think," said Miss Saxton with quiet dignity, "that you need not be afraid of my encouraging your daughter in anything to which you object. Indeed, I scarcely see her now. She is engaged at her duties almost all day."

"Duties," sneered Mrs. Levison; "fine duties! Duty begins at home, so I was always taught, and there she goes day after day dancing attendance on a little idiotic child and his old father, who looks more like the Wandering Jew than anything else—wasting her time and pretending it is a fine thing to be independent. Bah! I have no patience with her."

"And perhaps," said Miss Saxton gently, "that is just what she wants—patience. If you had studied her character——"

"Studied her character, indeed," interrupted Mrs. Levison stormily. "Upon my word, I shall begin to think the world is turning topsy-turvy. Where are parents told to *study* their children's characters, I should like to know? My Bible tells me, 'Children obey your parents in all things.' I always obeyed mine, and I expect my children to do the same."

"Alas!" thought Miss Saxton, "that poor misquoted Book. Why is it so painfully easy to drag out a text from its place and context, and fit it into the groove of our own petty, paltry desires."

But seeing that Mrs. Levison was really very much perturbed she only said it would, of course, be very much better for parents if they could always secure the obedience they exacted. Still, children had a way of growing up, and displaying qualities and characters of their own, and under some circumstances it was as well to be a little—judicious.

So, partly mollified and partly irate, Mrs. Levison drove back to Oaklands, with that riddle still unsolved, "What on earth am I to do with Sheba?"

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### A NEW THEORY.

MEANWHILE Sheba herself found her duties sit very lightly on her shoulders. Her little pupil was docile and very intelligent, and it was really a pleasure to teach him. Then the old German had taken a great liking to her, and being a man of culture and great learning, as well as of strange experiences, his society had for her an untiring charm. Of Paul Meredith she saw very little, though sometimes she heard the beautiful rich voice working away at some new score, or difficult exercise. He rarely, however, approached her at lesson time, and she appreciated the delicacy which kept him from anything like supervision, or interference, with her mode of management and instruction.

At first she had been puzzled by the old German's intimation that nothing in the shape of religious teaching was to be administered, but before many days she found the key to the puzzle. Neither Franz Müller nor his friend and pupil believed in the Christian religion as she had known and learnt it. Little by little, by hints and suggestions, and queer sharp queries, did the old German convey this to her mind, and after the first shock was over Sheba found herself eagerly and thirstily questioning him on many points and subjects which had hitherto been as a sealed book, or a subject to be received, not questioned.

Mrs. Levison had had one invariable answer to Sheba's inquiries from the time that the child had been able to put any at all—"My Bible says so." She always spoke of the Bible as a sort of personal possession of her own, and had a superficial knowledge of sundry texts and chapters that served her as a general ground-work of belief, and the assurance of her own future safety in the world to come.

When Sheba had timidly maintained that good actions must surely plead for something, she had always been told that the

best actions and the purest deeds of self-denial were only in the sight of God as "filthy rags." This sweeping denunciation had somewhat disheartened her—so much so that she observed in her usual downright fashion that she could see no use in trying to be good, if God declared it to be bad! He could but call sin—that. Yet Mrs. Levison had always upheld her own virtues as virtues, and never failed to declare that she thanked Heaven she was a Christian, and had been born of Christian parents.

One afternoon when the lessons were over, a sudden storm came on, and Sheba and her young charge were unable to go for their usual walk.

The little fellow was amusing himself with making notes on some of Herr Müller's MSS. paper, and the old man was leaning back in his easy-chair smoking a huge pipe, and watching the pouring rain. Sheba advanced to the window. "It looks very hopeless," she said. "I must wait till it is over, I suppose?"

He nodded. "Sit down and we will have a talk," he said.

Sheba obeyed, nothing loth, for she dearly loved hearing the old man argue, philosophize and dispute in his quaint, dogmatic fashion.

She took a chair opposite his own. "Are you still angry," she asked, "with what I said yesterday?"

"You mean," he said, "that inspiration and miracles don't admit of argument, but must be received in faith. No. I am not angry. One is not angry with a child because its mind cannot follow a certain line of thought, and if it were not for the faith instilled in childhood, there would be an end to the blind belief in religion, and the acceptance of the Bible as its basis. You, for instance, take its inspiration for granted just as you accept the authenticity of miracles that set at naught nature and every law of nature, and *that* for no good or satisfactory reason."

"The reason," said Sheba timidly, "is generally given. The prayer, or the desire for help in distressful circumstances."

"Bah!" he said contemptuously. "The desire of one feeble mortal in one small spot of the universe is, then, to work a revolution in all the laws of nature! Let man examine those laws before claiming any merit in blind faith. Traditional belief is not knowledge, and it is most often the ignorant and superstitious man who claims to know the Bible most thoroughly."

"I know," said the girl sadly, "there are many improbabilities, but if one began to argue them out, one would end in believing—nothing."

"So much the better," he said grimly, "for the education of the after-life."

Her eyes flashed, her face grew eager. "Oh," she cried, "is that possible? I have so often wondered. . . . it seems we *must* have so much more to learn."

"*Natürlich*," and he laughed. "To think that this brief poor little earth-life is *all* . . . and that all eternity bears the fruit of its misdoings! What fools ever propagated such a doctrine, and what greater fools have believed it! Does science accept any statement without proof? Is not every law of nature clearly printed as cause and effect. Yet in all the more important facts relative to the after-life, we are asked to rest content with nursery fables instilled into our baby minds at our mother's knee! We are forbidden to question *one* word in a host of improbable records in *one* Book in a world of books. . . . To limit inquiry is to stultify all mental and spiritual growth. But *here* it is limited in order to bind men's souls to submission, or content them with the construction put upon it by a parcel of priests, who know perfectly well that all its early spiritual history has been handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation—that it is far more *man's* word than God's." He paused, puffing a huge cloud of smoke from between his lips, as he watched that troubled girl's face.

"There are problems of life and mind," he went on, "which demand deep, patient research, and yet these are the very problems that are the least considered. They are carelessly dismissed, or studiously evaded. Tell me, now, you have a mother; she taught you to say prayers, to go to church; to learn certain creeds and collects. Did you ever go to her, and say, 'Explain this,' or 'Tell me why I must believe that?' Could she explain? No, of course not. We none of us can. Now my father—will you wonder when I tell you—he was once a priest of Rome. He left the Church, he could not bear its hypocrisy, its slavery, its blind submission to an ecclesiastical rule, which from the Seven Hills stretches a spiritual sceptre over half the world. Having left it, he was persecuted with a bitterness and animosity worthy of fiends! That was what I first learnt of religion. From that time I began to seek and to find for myself. My father was a clever man. He wrote very clever books; he made powerful friends. I was sent to one of our great universities and if I had possessed any great faith in God, or Christ, or the Church, I should have lost it there. It was our pride to say we had proved everything, and believed nothing; but gradually the hot fires of youth burned themselves out, I grew calmer and more philosophical. I could separate grain from chaff, fact from fact, superstition from reality."

"And now?" questioned Sheba eagerly, as he paused again.

"Now," he shrugged his shoulders, "I believe in art," he said with a grim smile. "More—I dare not say, for fear it would shock you."

"Oh, please tell me more," cried the girl eagerly. "I have never found any one to whom I could talk on these subjects. The clergyman who used to teach me was so good, he saw everything reflected as it were in the light of Heaven, but I—I never could;—and I am so restless, so unhappy, so terribly perplexed."

"Are you?" said the old man, looking at the great eager eyes—the flushed face. "Well, *mein Fräulein*, I fear I shall not make you any happier if I tell you what I believe, or question. Let it rest. Keep your own simple faith, and be content, if you can."

"But—I cannot."

"You must then be prepared to sacrifice many pet notions," he said, still regarding her with that speculative glance. "Progress in thought, as in everything else, means mental friction, and that raises clouds of dust between what has been, and what is to be, till sometimes men are choked and blinded, and ready to forswear further trouble because the result is not agreeable. Now we will suppose that you think your mind is swept and garnished, a clean, comfortable little chamber of childish simplicity. Then here come I like a great, rough broom. Prepare for the dust."

"Well?" she said, half laughing, but wholly eager.

"Well," he answered, "I am not going to tell you there is no God, that the world grew out of nothing, and yet in seven days stood complete as it stands now, because, what matters seven days, or seventy years, or seven million years, when the Creative Power has once been granted. The command '*Be*' was sufficient. The speculations as to actual time concern us far less than the Power that first produced order out of chaos, and organized a system of nature so perfect that the original laws have never needed change, but stand fixed and sure for all time: day and night, summer and winter, seed-time and harvest, all in their way necessary, and all in their way incapable of improvement. Against the great First Cause—Divine, if you will, nothing need be said. But let us come to man, and see from your point of view what he has done to further the wishes of his Creator, or abide by the laws of existence. Very early we come to sin. Naturally we ask, how could One to whom sin was unknown, create a being in His own image with this capacity already granted in his nature?"

"I have often wondered about that," said Sheba, as the old

man paused to blow out another cloud of smoke; "or why God should have created man at all, unless it was as an experiment."

"If so, it was an experiment which has provided him with a somewhat troublesome Frankenstein," murmured the old German musingly. "Well, let us say it was an experiment. It did not answer, you see. He went from bad to worse. He began to develop with alarming rapidity all those sins and failings which we see to this day. Disobedience, deceit, treachery, pride, self-sufficiency, envy, hatred, lying, blood-guiltiness, truly a goodly crop! Yet, doubtless, he was intended for a special place in nature, and to fill that place perfectly. We are told he has never done so, and that has given rise to an idea that he has a future state awaiting him, where he will be able to perfect all that is incomplete here. But why limit him to one future state? Why should he not be a creature of many?"

As he looked straight at Sheba while asking the question, she felt he expected an answer, but the only response of which she was capable was to echo his own words.

"Of—many?" she said in a bewildered manner.

"But certainly, *mein Fräulein*, of many worlds, of many conditions. You cannot grasp the idea? Ah, but I see in the future the dawn of a new science which shall set aside the world's old prejudices. Men are not yet ripe for it . . . but it will come . . . trust me it will come. It will sweep away the irrational follies that have clouded the sky of progress . . . man will recognize his own powers, and live for his own ennoblement; live, not for his three or fourscore years of human life, but for that future which now he dreads: that future which Priesthood has determined for him as a limitless period of damnation, or bliss, according to the mode in which those brief, blundering, helpless years on the earth plane have been spent. How rational! How comforting a creed, is it not?"

"Then what," faltered Sheba in bewilderment, "is your idea of man and his future state?"

He laughed, a short gruff laugh, as he blew his clouds of smoke upward to the ceiling.

"In nature," he said, "nothing is stationary; all is progressive. The life and powers of this planet, which to us seem all and everything, are linked with the life and evolution of other planets more than we wot of. How shall I explain? Life is perpetual motion. Nothing is *still*. The blood in the human frame, the blossoms of the tree, the plants, the air, the sea, the chain of planets, the stars, all have the rotatory impulse, all revolve and circulate, round and round and round unceasingly, reaching

end that is but a new beginning. Shall man alone have his one little day, and his long rest? No, far otherwise. He too goes on, and on, and on, further than the mind can stretch, higher than human thought can reach. Let not the gross and evil-minded think that with the end of earth-life, comes for him a pure and perfect change. To the drunkard, the debauchee, the thief, the murderer, the hypocrite, there still remains the spirit that he nourished and cherished to the exclusion of higher and nobler endeavours. He carries it with him, he hears still its devilish promptings, he sees his vice reflected as in a mirror. The work, the real labour then begins. Little by little, stage by stage, he can raise himself higher in the scale, or, still impeded and weighed down by the grosser passions, revolve in even a lower sphere than the planet he has left."

"That," said Sheba thoughtfully, "sounds very terrible."

"It is just," said the old man sternly, "though it is not theology—the theology that speaks of one creed for the salvation of all humanity, and of a few thousand years as the sole record of our earth-world."

"Can it be traced back so far then?" inquired Sheba.

"Far?" he said thoughtfully. "If I were to speak to you of millions of millions of years, your brain would get perplexed. Yet there is a race about whom the civilized West knows little and cares less, who have traced back the earth history to a period modern knowledge has never reached—a race who were in existence when there was no such thing as the Continent of Europe. . . . Ah! if you but knew my language, what wonders it to you would unfold. I come of a people, who think, think—always they think. What I have there" (he waved his hand in the direction of his bookshelves) "will only be known perhaps twenty, or thirty years hence, to English philosophers through the medium of translation. To me they have long been friends. They have taught me to honour life, and to have no fear of death. But why? Not because I—poor, sinning, erring mortal—can throw off all my soul's responsibility and believe it possible to find happiness in a future condition of utter quiescence, varied by harping on harps and adoring some vague glory—no; but because with death opens out a new life . . . for all life is death, and all death is life in another form. Nothing really *dies*; it but changes its condition . . . decay breeds life anew in the dead substance and gives it a different existence . . . Is man alone to have but one? All religions teach it because they are rooted in past ignorance and superstition . . . but science and thought teach it not. Again and again, and yet again shall man live—for that which *is* man

knows no death . . . the essence of immortality is with him and through the changing cycles of years he sweeps along his course—his *final* destiny who shall declare? No priesthood can solve that riddle, even though it professes to do so by Biblical record. Happily, I see a future when we shall read these records by the interpretation of science—not of priests."

"You are very bitter," she said, "against priests."

"Have I not good reason? I know every detail of my father's life. I know from his own lips what are the dogmas of that most comfortless faith. It had its root in ignorance and superstition, and through every sign of progress and advancement, it still tried to hold *that* root as its basis and one of its surest weapons. To prove this, look for yourself into the history of any purely Catholic country, say Italy, Spain, France, or Ireland—what will you see? The iron heel of oppression and tyranny engendering poverty, distress and mental blindness. Can any power be so tyrannous or so overmastering as a power that decrees to itself command over a man's soul, not only for this life but for the hereafter? There you have the keynote to the great breadth and magnitude of Popish possessions in the old dark ages. . . . When a man owned millions, and lay on his death-bed, and a priest whispered in his ear: 'Your millions to the Church, or your soul to everlasting damnation!'—I suppose he did not hesitate very long. By the time he found out that no other human being had the slightest power or control over his spiritual welfare, it was probably too late to alter his will and testament, so his relations cursed him, and the Church fattened and waxed more and more audacious every day. The best part of man's mental outfit is judgment, and freedom of thought. The moment he puts his neck under the yoke of any special creed, faith, or dogma of *man*, he sacrifices his best possession. . . . Let him search for himself, think for himself, and seek out Truth without help or hindrance from old-world prejudices, and stale traditions."

"But suppose men are weak and ignorant, and have neither time nor ability to make such a search?" suggested Sheba diffidently.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"For the weak and ignorant," he said, "they must bear their burden as best they can—priests won't lighten it, be very sure; as for the other class," he smiled somewhat grimly, "they will have time enough"—he went on, as he laid down his great pipe, which was finished at last: "Do you forget what I told you, that life is by no means the brief thing of threescore years and ten most men believe it to be?"



"But this—doctrine, shall I call it?—is as much in want of proof as the old one that you demolish."

He looked at her gravely.

"Yes," he said, "you are right; but you must remember that to me it has been the subject of long years of study and investigation. I examine it, not as it stands *alone*, but as an integral part of a whole system—a system so wonderful, so complicated, yet withal so perfect, that its study is also its reward. What does man know of man? He is a bundle of senses and appetites, foolish desires and vain ambitions; granted—but is there not also *something*—one small principle, let us call it—that represents in him the Divine nature and alone separates him from the animal? This is the reasoning faculty, the human soul, a link between Creator and created which impels and *teaches* higher progress, until the strength of the highest attraction draws it finally into its original condition. So is free will granted that the choice between good and evil may be *conscious*, and every victory obtained by the higher over the lower nature an additional source of strength for ensuing conflicts. The soul is the battlefield. Here the warfare of passion, desire, vanity, selfishness and pride takes place, and here takes place also that separation which, as yet, you could not comprehend if I explained, but whose nature is to withdraw a permanent and eternal personality from a transient shape that it inhabits for the purpose of discipline. Death is thus no terror, only a mere physical ill brought about by physical requirements."

"That is very philosophical," said Sheba. "But I am too great a coward to look upon death so calmly. . . . Indeed, the fact of having many instead of *one*, is not more comforting than the accepted Christian doctrine of judgment, and its penalties or rewards."

"Phooh!" said the old man contemptuously. "How you talk like a child who has well learnt its alphabet of religion. Death—it is simply the parting with a sheath that is rusty and cumbersome. Man himself, or that which constitutes him, escapes gladly enough. . . . The essence of his personality is with him—the best part—the only part, so to speak, that was the *man*."

"Yet you say *that* is born again and again, with no consciousness of former conditions. It is like the doctrine of Pythagoras."

"Not quite," he said with his odd smile. "The science of which I speak, and whose doctrines are still like mysteries unrevealed to the European world, deals with an entity during a long series of existences, all of them rational and none of them proving that, however its first principle was evolved, whether from the ape he resembles, or the Spirit who decreed 'Be,' he never returns

again to a purely animal condition. Evolution is ceaseless in its work ; it is a process still going on with man as with everything that means development of what *has* been into a perfection that *may* be. If bygone races could look on us to-day with a perfect remembrance of what they were in their day, they might be as filled with astonishment as we ourselves, if we returned some thousand years hence to look on our successors."

There was a long, thoughtful pause. It was altogether such a novel doctrine to Sheba, that her mind could scarcely grasp it. It was familiar enough to Franz Müller, who had studied a great deal of Eastern literature, and was almost as familiar with it as with the works of Strauss, Goethe, Hegel and Schopenhauer. Whether these studies and researches had been of actual benefit, it is not easy to determine. He was right when he said he believed in very little, though he could theorize and philosophize on almost every subject.

He certainly was not a safe, though a deeply interesting teacher, for any one of Sheba's temperament, but there was no one to tell her so, and no one to care or question as to what that eager, thirsting soul of hers was receiving. Mrs. Levison, having grounded her children in the usual forms, creeds and doctrines of nineteenth century Christianity never troubled herself further about their spiritual condition. As long as they went regularly to church, and she saw the Bible on their dressing-tables, she felt quite satisfied. She was fond of quoting "Train up a child in the way he should go." Of course, if that child did not complete the proverb for himself, or herself, she was not to blame.

Sheba remembered that text as she went home through the glistening wet streets after listening to Müller's dissertation, but remembered it only to feel what a wide difference lay between it, and her present intentions of carrying it out.

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

### THE UNWISDOM OF THOUGHT.

THE opera was over late that night, and Meredith returned somewhat fatigued ; Müller had not waited for him, and he found him on his return smoking and busied with those eternal MSS. that were one day to startle the world of music into recognition of an entirely original genius.

He looked up as the young man entered. "Tired?" he said

' Ah, I see—you need not speak. There is your supper there. The child put it all right for you . . . and there is the wine . . . our good friend Niersteiner ; he will rouse your spirits."

Meredith threw himself into the chair placed carefully beside the little table on which his evening meal was laid out—but though he drank off a glass of the clear golden wine, he ate nothing.

" *Was ist ?* " asked the old German presently ; " you are not yourself, *mein lieber*."

" I am only tired," said Paul ; " the music is ringing in my head. Somehow, whenever I sing ' The Prophet ' I think of Sheba Ormatroyd."

" It is not wise to think of any woman twice," said old Müller, glancing up from those lines of notes. " For why ? You think twice, and if you think twice you think again—and the oftener you think, the worse it is for you. That is so—*nicht wahr ?* "

" I suppose it is," the young man answered wearily. " Was she here to-day ? "

" Of course ; the rain kept her from her walk, so she sat here with me and we talked."

" I suppose," said Paul, " you mean you talked, and she listened."

" She is a good listener," said Müller smiling. " I am afraid I frightened her a little. She will have much to think of—but then, her mind is active—she *can* think."

" I hope," said Paul, looking at him suddenly, " you have not been mystifying and perplexing her brains as you used to do mine."

" I have given her an opportunity of using them on a new subject. What will result I cannot presume to say . . . there are some wise folks in the world, you know, who have deemed it is best for man to accept what his reason cannot explain, lest his mind, being exercised, should lead him astray. Truth should always be veiled, because mortal eyes cannot bear its glory. The mind should not question or doubt, because both are sinful and may end in complete confusion. Yea, even the very questioning of that Beginning which has been so satisfactorily established, and that Being who has been filtered through the mind and imaginings of man until His likeness is lost in a weak conception, based on superstition and childish belief, is not permissible."

" Did you tell her this ? " asked Paul, growing interested despite his weariness.

" Yes—something of the sort. Oh, to see her face pale, and her big serious eyes dilate ! . . . I wish I could read that girl's future. She is in wrong hands altogether. She wants different training."

" *Natürlich*," said Paul with a faint smile. " They all do . . .

Yours, for instance. I often wonder you have never established a school of female philosophers ; what a revolution it would make."

"I would do it if I knew many girls like Sheba Ormatroyd," said the old man, puffing huge volumes of smoke out of the big pipe. "She has thought much. She went straight to the root of the matter—the duality of good and evil . . . She thinks man was created as an experiment—but of course she holds the usual ideas imbibed at our mothers' knees in infancy—one life, right or wrong—happy or wretched—and then a long night of waiting and a day of judgment ; the fact of being Christian by virtue of baptism, no matter what the after life may be—the trusting to priestly explanation of Scripture, and abiding by the strict letter of a text."

He pushed his papers aside and came over to the fireplace.

"I verily believe," he said, "that you vainglorious English fancy *your* Bible, as you call it, was inspired direct of Heaven in your own polyglot language, and dropped from thence ready bound into your pulpits, and churches. You talk as if such were the case . . . Oh ! for the day that I see coming—the day when truth shall be heard through the length and breadth of the earth, and that foolish dead-letter *idolatry* abolished ; when man shall see for himself that he holds the Divine Immortal Spirit in his own soul, and shall live by that light, and work for its purposes instead of throwing the whole onus of his future on the shoulders of his fellow-man, and the traditions of a bigoted faith !"

"That day is very far off, I should think," remarked Paul. "It won't be in our time, my good friend, or our children's either for that matter. You can't root up some hundreds of different sects and set them all to accept one law and one faith, and you will never get any member of the English Church to acknowledge that a *gnostic* and an *agnostic* are not one and the same thing, or that both are not—atheists. The idea of any one calling that 'Unknowable,' of whose Person and Nature they are quite confident, and on whose imaginary benevolence they firmly rest all their hopes of the future ! It seems to them preposterous. It is a curious fact that the aggregate portion of humanity prefers to have its religion done for it."

"It is no more curious," said Müller, "than to note the number of reasonable beings who never give themselves the trouble to think of any religion at all—anything beyond frivolity and pleasure-seeking and merry-making ! Living their earth life with no higher desires and ambitions than these, they yet expect to go straight into some glorified state of being they call 'Heaven,' when that earth life is over. Poor fools—for them the hour of death will be indeed

the hour of revelation ! Think of sectarian prejudices—of narrow beliefs—of fragments of splintered truth grasped in trembling hands and held out as a passport ; of all the useless lip-service—all the empty forms—all that the outward life has practised and to which the soul gives the lie ! Picture to yourself this crowd of shivering spirits standing at the portals of the vast Beyond—the picture is appalling . . . Here stands one clamouring, ‘I was baptized into Thy Church, oh Lord ; therefore am I saved.’—Here another, ‘I have never missed early celebration—I have partaken of Thy own Flesh and Blood, and believed in the real presence—surely I am saved.’ Here yet another, ‘My righteousness is as filthy rags ; still I have built a church and sent out missionaries to the heathen, and given to all charities and godly institutes of *my own sect*—surely I am saved.’ Then he laughed grimly, “And you and I, Paul—who have gone deeper into the matter and see the errors of others so plainly, what shall we say for ourselves that is wiser, or better than this—eh?”

“God knows,” said the young man drearily. “It is the old cry, you know, Müller. ‘Ye remove our landmarks, give us others that are better . . . ye take away our foothold—what have ye surer or safer in its place?’”

“There is nothing *sure* or *safe* to be learnt, or to be found,” said Müller more seriously than he had yet spoken ; “not in this world—for this world is only a novitiate, a preparation—the human mind is not capable of comprehending the Infinite, or bringing the Person or Essence of a Being such as the Creator of the Universe, into the narrow scope of human words as explanation. Language cannot convey to us the real nature of God—and man, since the infancy of thought, has, therefore, committed the folly of bringing Him into human conception by dowering Him with human attributes on a somewhat larger scale. The machine made by a human brain and evolved from human consciousness may be absolutely perfect as far as its power, its use, and its mechanism, yet that machine cannot comprehend *its own use*, or the nature of its maker. Why not so with man and his Creator? . He knows he *is*, and that he has a life to live and duties to perform while that life is conscious, but he is not intended to know more here—in the earth life. He is not *capable* of knowing more, though his vanity will not allow him to believe so. Ah ! if the arrogant divines who fill Christian pulpits and have done so much to blind the eyes and destroy the judgment of men, would only preach of their own ignorance and limited powers of research, they could at least help instead of hinder those who seek the great truths of the Hereafter.”

"Always a slap at the pulpit, Müller," said the young man smiling. "Even philosophy has not taught you to regard that institution calmly and forbearingly."

"No!" said the old German roughly, "it has not—because it is my natural enemy, because it substitutes bombast, abstractions, and fanciful imagery for the truth; because it upholds the littleness of man to be all-important, because it is arrogant and vain-glorious and would only allow man to know God through itself if it could; thank science and human reason that it can't do so any longer. Most priests speak of man as if the whole universe had been created for him instead of his being only a small fragment of its vast plan—the last work of the Creator, not the first, and the most refractory and troublesome of all!"

"All animal life is selfish and egotistic," said Paul musingly. "Each of us wants his own desires gratified, his own comforts supplied; indeed for what else are we in a material world at all?"

"For its use and purpose, perhaps, not for our own," said Müller. "Certainly the material world gets the best of it—it has all man's skill, power and invention spent endlessly on itself, and gives him nothing for which he does not labour. Yes, it gives him death . . . death in a hundred shapes and forms which he must combat as best he may. There is a popular cant which calls Nature 'our kind mother.' Now that is just one of those things men say and repeat to each other, without thinking of the real meaning."

"What is Nature, then?" asked Paul. "You generally take the opposite side of an established belief."

"The kindness of Nature should *not* be an established belief," cried the old man wrathfully. "Think it out for a moment—she yields beauty to the earth and scatters plagues and pestilence in the same spot: she gives abominable climates to the countries where the largest amount of human life is propagated; or if temperature and climate are genial and beneficial they are counterbalanced by tortures of insects and reptiles, and perils of savage foes, and furious animals. Disorder, destruction, sickness and danger are all her children, her favourite children, one would say, seeing that each and all of these are foes to the human race. Man is brought into the world, not to find her forces at his service, but that he may wage perpetual warfare against them. Hurricanes and earthquakes destroy his handiwork with absolutely brutal disregard to the skill and toil spent in that labour. The sea is a deadly foe, the sky scatters hail and rain, the air whirlwinds and tempests. The apparent insignifi-

cance of insect life can be turned into a devastating army; at every turn and from every sentient thing we meet with danger or opposition. And this is your kind Nature, your beneficent mother! *Ach, lieber Himmel!*"

"Oh, Müller, Müller," laughed the young singer in mock despair, "have you a good word for nothing? Do you condemn earth and Heaven, God and man, faith and unfaith, good and evil alike with scathing philosophy?"

"I come of a race that thinks," answered the old man quietly, "and accept not hearsay and tradition to save a little trouble to their own brains. Now *your* countrymen like their thinking done for them, while they grub for gold, or smoke in their offices, or read their newspapers, or nurse their babies; their only virtues are *domestic*—*ja!* a land of wife-beaters, of drunkards, of mammon-worshippers—and—yes, all that is to their credit—of church builders! A land of magnificent hypocrites and incredible dullards! Sum up all their virtues in that one word, *domestic*. They are 'stay-at-home,' they pay their taxes, they reverence rank and royalty, they worship wealth, they support their families, and they go regularly to their parish church. Ah, my Paul, and they expect all the world to look on and say with admiring breath, 'Surely of such is the kingdom of Heaven!' When I write a History of Nations——"

But Paul laughed outright. "Another history," he said; "how many does that make, *lieber Freund?*"

He rose from his seat and went over to the old German and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"To hear you talk," he said, "one would imagine you had not a kind feeling for any of your race. Fortunately I know better. Your heart is as sympathetic as it is big and generous—it is only your brain that is cynical and pessimistic. And now I'm not going to listen to you any more to-night. You had better sit up and try your hand at one of those wonderful histories that, like the blessings of man, never *are*, but always are 'to be.' Seriously, Müller, if you don't make haste and write *one*, at least, you will find that the time allotted for your natural existence has gone by, unless, of course, you mean to return again to the earth plane; but as you cannot choose your personality, you may find your soul in the body of one of your enemies the priests at your next incarnation."

Müller laughed too as he rose and laid aside his pipe and shook himself like a great rough bear.

"Maybe," he said, "but he would be a priest of a new order and persuasion if he had my soul within him. As for the

histories—perhaps I am only waiting to know if it will be a waste or a gain of time and thought to write them, before I commence to do so. And now good-night, you need some sleep, or you will be fit for nothing to-morrow."

"Good-night," said Paul; "if you have succeeded in making Sheba Ormatroyd only half as uncomfortable as you have made me, you may go to sleep with a quiet conscience. Rest assured neither of us can ever again be satisfied with *living* life, and not thinking of its real purport."

"Better pain than sloth," said Müller fiercely; "better doubt than blindness; better shame than self-satisfaction! The torpor of even the thinking portion of the civilized world is appalling with regard to intellectual culture, and spiritual advance. What can one say of the *non-thinking*? As beasts ye live, and eat, and sleep, and devour one another. . . . As beasts—ye deserve to die!"

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## CHAPTER XXX.

### SHEBA RECEIVES A GIFT.

SINCE Sheba had entered on her career of independence she had been completely ostracized from her home circle. She never dined with them now, taking her own simple meal at mid-day, at a confectioner's shop in George Street, and having merely some tea in the library or her own room when she returned home. This special evening, however, as she entered her room, she found a note pinned to a large parcel that was lying on her bed. She saw it was in her mother's handwriting, and somewhat surprised, she opened it.

It began almost affectionately: "Dear child,—Let us bury these unhappy differences. We will say no more about your foolish whim. Put on this pretty frock, and come down to dinner at seven as usual, if only to please your poor unhappy mother. You will find two old friends here."

The blood rushed to the girl's face; her heart swelled and softened. Had she misjudged her mother after all? Was she unhappy despite her luxurious life, and did she love her a little, despite their many differences of opinion? The quick tears dropped on those pencilled lines; she felt how lonely her life had been of late, and that it was a welcome relief to hear the unhappy quarrels were to be buried. It was characteristic of her to think far more of the note and its kind words, than of the



accompanying present ; characteristic, too, that instead of looking at it, she should seat herself by the bed and allow her thoughts to wander off into all sorts of extraordinary channels, all of them flowing to or from the fount of that curious intellect which had to-day been unsealed for her edification.

The old German had aptly described himself as a "broom," a great rough broom, but Sheba's mind had not been such a simple ungarnished chamber as he supposed. On the contrary, ever since she could think or reason at all, religious speculations had dominated every other. The world beyond was far oftener in her thoughts than the world of the present, though it was not the sort of world presented by ordinary creeds and doctrines—a vague, mysterious, unaccountable place, where winged beings floated to and fro on mystic errands of doubtful utility, and whose leisure time was spent in harping hymns, and, to quote Franz Müller again, "in eternal adoration of some vaguely defined glory."

As a child she had wondered what pleasure such an existence would have for unmusical people, or specially active minds to whom quiescence meant only stagnation. She had been told it was impious and sinful to question such matters, and referred to the Book of Revelation, which, after reading, she had likened to an impossible fairy tale.

Now, however, all these speculations, all these inexplicable mysteries seemed to crowd back, and weigh on her brain even more heavily than of yore.

She had been prepared to hear of faulty teaching, of errors mixed with truth, as chaff with grain ; of the inutility of creeds, and forms, and doctrines, on which the ordinary disciples of Christianity laid such stress ; but she had not been prepared to hear that the idea of one Heaven and one earth for man might be altogether erroneous ; that hell, as a *place*, had no existence ; that there was a conception of Nature, and of the origin and destiny of human life, differing entirely from any preconceived or theological idea which had ever been presented to her.

To trace the beginning of all things back, infinitely further than that unsatisfactory phrase of the First Chapter of Genesis, was in itself astounding ; but to hear that a race was in existence who knew infinitely more about the *science* of spiritual things than any books recorded, and to be suddenly presented with a view of Nature and man, such as her wildest dreams had never approached, this was what had so overpowered her mind and paralyzed its usual activity.

She sat there on a low chair by the bed with that little note

utterly forgotten, and the parcel to which it attracted her notice still unopened. She thought of Noel Hill. How good he was, how simple, how earnest; but was he blinded by that array of long-received and accepted doctrines, with which the Church bandages the eyes of its servants, and bars the way to its own more rational enlightenment?

She had read over every portion of the orthodox Church-service, from the Preface to the Thirty-nine Articles, and arriving at the last-named portion, had marvelled how any man could conscientiously vow to accept, maintain and believe them. As for the Athanasian Creed, even Noel Hill had declined to discuss *that*. Not many weeks back it had been read out in church, and she had shocked her mother afterwards by saying that if the so-called saint had intended it as an explanation, his intellect had proved itself signally incapable of the task he had undertaken.

Mrs. Levison had never even attempted to understand it; she did not think it necessary, being one of that contented class of persons who are satisfied that wiser ministers have arranged these matters for them, and that their part of Christian duty is simply to say "Amen" to the statements they hear from altar, or pulpit.

Poor Sheba. Her brain ached; her heart was heavy. The old footholds seemed slipping further and further away. She felt as one who wades through deep waters, and finds that at every step the dark swift current sweeps higher and higher, till breath is suspended, and every advance threatens destruction.

Half unconsciously she sank on her knees in the gathering darkness, and her heart cried out faintly and feebly for an aid that she told herself was fast becoming problematical.

"Oh, God! if indeed there be a God whom the prayers of mortals can reach, help me now. Show me Thyself . . . ere it is too late."

Those last words fell like a whisper through the falling dusk, and she shuddered at her own temerity even as they left her lips.

For an instant she raised her head; her eyes strained upwards. All was silence. Night fell like a veil over the external world, and, alas! alas! a darker and more terrible veil seemed to descend and enfold that kneeling figure, for whom, as for thousands and thousands of others, the first touch of doubt seemed as an earthquake's shock, shivering every preconceived faith into a myriad fragments, opening wide an insatiable abyss, into which fell all that had hitherto meant safety, and shelter, and life!

\* \* \* \* \*

The door opened suddenly. A little figure gorgeous as a

butterfly stood there, and tried to pierce the gloom by the aid of the lights in the passage.

A little shrill voice echoed wonderingly through the room :

"Sheba, Sheba! Good gracious; what are you saying your prayers for at this time? Surely you're not going to bed! And your dress—why, you haven't even looked at it. Aren't you going to put it on?"

Sheba rose from her knees, dazed and bewildered.

The child fidgeted about, lighting the candles, tugging at the string of the parcel, chattering all the time as incessantly as a little brook flowing over its stony pebbles.

"Mamma is so anxious you should look nice, and this gown is lovely. I went with her to buy it, and she had it made by your own old Toinette. I should have been jealous only I had a new one too, and you are to wear crimson roses with it. Oh, Sheba; why don't you wake up? Why, in a quarter-of-an-hour they will be all here—your great friend Bessie Saxton, and the young clergyman, and a strange foreign gentleman just come over from England—such a swell; mamma is quite excited about him. He has a title, the Count de Phalamong, I think that's his name. Oh, dear; if I were only as old as you, and could go down to dinner!"

Sheba roused herself with an effort. "Did you say Bessie Saxton was coming?" she asked, rapidly unfastening her dress and walking over to the toilet-table.

"Yes," cried Dolly, who had by this time cut the string, and now was flinging aside folds of paper until at last the new gown itself was revealed, and laid down on the bed with almost reverential touch. "You had better make haste," she went on. "Shall I ask Martha to come and help you? She dressed me in half-an-hour."

"No," said Sheba shortly. "I never want help, as you know. I was not brought up to be useless. Fifteen minutes is plenty of time even to get into a new gown."

"You *are* funny," said Dolly, surveying her, as she dashed cold water over her face and shoulders. "Fancy not caring how you look, or what you put on! What a splendid colour that cold water gives you. I never dare wash in cold water. I have such a delicate skin, and I want to take care of my complexion, for when I grow up—Oh! why don't you leave your hair like that? it suits you rough and loose. There now; you've spoilt it. Give your head a shake—so. Don't you see the difference that loose wave makes dropping forward? If I had hair like yours I should spend hours trying to find what style suited me best. What,

changed your petticoats—and ready for your dress ! Gracious ! how quick you are."

Sheba had paid very little attention to this string of remarks ; now she walked over to the bed for her dress, and for a moment stood looking at it in astonishment.

"Isn't it lovely ? I said so," chirruped Dolly at her ear. "Such soft, rich silk, and no fear of creasing it, and such a lovely colour, and hasn't Toinette made it your way—just as if you had told her, and only two days to do it in !"

Sheba took up the gown, almost fearful of its delicate beauty. It was of a thick, very soft silk, of a lovely pale shade of yellow—the very shade for her brunette colouring ; and it was made somewhat in the fashion of her usual gowns, draped from the shoulders to the hem, and confined merely by a broad silver girdle at the waist.

With her magnificent hair coiled high on the small shapely head, and that lovely flush of feverish excitement still burning on either cheek and lighting the great sombre eyes, Sheba looked like a picture of some Eastern queen, and as Dolly watched that slender figure with its free, graceful movements, she felt almost inclined to forswear crinoline and flounces herself.

Just as Sheba was fastening the rich soft folds, the door again opened, and her mother entered. In her hand she held a bunch of crimson roses just gathered from the conservatory. She almost started when she saw the transformation in her daughter, and the simple elegance of the young slight figure, that put her own gorgeous *toilette* completely in the shade.

"Why, Sheba !" she exclaimed in surprise ; "I shouldn't have known you. What wonders dress can work !"

"Thank you so much for it, dear mother," said the girl timidly, coming near the violet silk and yellow roses, and bending to touch her mother's cheek.

Mrs. Levison drew hastily back with a vivid remembrance of pistachio-nut powder lavishly and recently employed.

"Yes, yes, my dear ; I quite understand," she said hurriedly. "And I am very glad you are going to be sensible again. Family quarrels are hateful, and what would the Saxtons think not to see you at dinner ? By-the-by, it is just upon seven. Here, take your roses ; I must be off to the drawing-room, and don't be long coming down. I thought you would have been dressed by this time."

"I think," said Miss Dolly pertly, "she was asking a blessing on her new frock. I found her praying beside it. Fancy saying prayers except at bed-time. I wouldn't ; it's bother enough then. But Sheba is so funny !"

Mrs. Levison left the room hurriedly without further observation. It didn't matter to her if Sheba prayed a dozen times a day as long as she had for once dressed herself decently, and seemed prepared to be amiable.

"She looks positively pretty," she said to herself with more of surprise than pleasure. "I couldn't have believed it. Will she make an impression, I wonder?"

Just as she reached the drawing-room, Bessie and Mr. Saxton arrived, and Noel Hill followed almost directly. Mrs. Levison noticed his glance wander round the room.

"My daughter will be here presently," she said, as she eagerly took in every detail of Bessie's *toilette*, and wondered whether, after all, she had done well in keeping Sheba's costume to her own peculiar style, instead of modernizing it. For Miss Saxton was as complete an epitome of a fashion plate as woman's heart could desire. Her fair hair was *crêped* and turned into a pyramid; her gown was a miracle of flounces and lace, with little knots of flowers dropped cunningly amongst its many folds. It was also cut low in the neck, displaying a well-shaped bust and throat, and full white arms, and altogether producing a result that must have been eminently satisfactory to any woman's mind who studied fashion more than ease, or grace, or originality.

In a few moments more the host bustled in, fussy and important, and vulgar as ever. Then came a loud peal at the bell, a nervous convulsion on the part of Mrs. Levison, and almost immediately the door opened, and the servant announced somewhat huskily, as became one unused to the enunciation of titles, and especially of foreign titles:

"The Count de Pharamong!"

Mrs. Levison was gracious—and she flattered herself stately—in her welcome. Her husband was, however, too sensible of the honour of entertaining a title at his own "mahogany," as he delicately put it, to be altogether at his ease. He used "Mossoo le Count" at every possible opportunity, and never left the unfortunate guest a moment's repose—talking to him, or at him, in a breathless, incessant fashion that irritated even his well-bred composure.

It nearly drove Bessie Saxton wild, she having decreed that the illustrious foreigner was to fall captive to her bow and spear, and not relishing Mr. Levison's interference with her "soft eyes, and low reliefs."

As for Count Pharamond himself, he was inwardly summing up host and hostess and guests with an accuracy that did him infinite credit, when the door was quietly opened and he saw standing

there a vision that fairly astounded even his beauty-sated eyes. Eagerly he watched the stately young form coming forward with so serene a grace, and muttered below his breath :

"*Dieu !* She is worthy of Paris !"

To associate her with his host or hostess seemed such an incongruity that he was conscious of a feeling nearly approaching disgust when Mr. Levison said loudly and brusquely :

"Here, Sheba, I want to introduce you. My friend, Monsieur le Count de Pharamond—my daughter—or should I say, my step-daughter—Miss Ormatroyd."

Sheba bowed. Her eyes, grave and questioning as a child's newly roused from sleep, gazed quietly up at the strange and singularly handsome face bent almost reverentially before her. Then she passed on, and greeted Bessie and Noel Hill, both of whom were equally amazed at her changed appearance.

She had only time to say a few words—no time at all to notice Bessie's curious look and somewhat acrimonious greeting : "Well, Sheba ! you *are* transformed"—when dinner was announced, and she found herself following her mother and the illustrious guest, on the arm of Noel Hill.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### EXCHANGED CONFIDENCES.

"I BEGAN to despair of ever seeing you again," began Noel Hill to his companion as they seated themselves at the flower-decked table. "I have called several times ; you were always out."

"I am out every day till five o'clock," said Sheba. "You know I have a teaching engagement ?"

"Yes," he said, "I know ;" thinking how incongruous seemed the association of a daily governess' life, with this stately young goddess.

"Do you like your new duties ?" he asked presently.

"Very much," said Sheba, while a quick, bright blush rose to her cheek, and for a moment her whole face grew sweet and soft and tender, as a face grows at some pleasant memory.

Noel Hill noticed the change and wondered as to its cause. He had heard also of the queer old man, the Wandering Jew, who was Sheba's employer—surely there could be no great charm about him to raise that flush and glow of feeling. The count, watching her also from his side of the table, felt an odd, jealous pang at sight of that lovely blush. He attributed it to something her companion had said, and wondered what it could have been.

Bessie noticed it too, and whispered audibly to her host, by whose side she was seated: "How Sheba does flirt, to be sure!" and all the time Sheba was unconscious of notice or remark, and only saw before her that face of her "Prophet," and seemed to hear again his matchless melody of voice.

The dinner went on with its wearisome round of courses and sparkling wines, about each of which Mr. Levison had something to say and boast.

"You see, Monsieur le Count, the colonies aren't so bad, after all, eh?" And the polite Frenchman, who spoke English beautifully, would bow and smile, and say he was indeed too enchanted with such magnificent hospitality.

Sheba's head ached with the lights, and clatter of tongues, and she leant back in her chair and wondered whenever her mother intended to give the signal to leave the room.

At last Mrs. Levison rose—Count Pharamond, being nearest the door, held it open as the ladies passed through. Sheba was last, and as she moved along one of the crimson roses at her waist fell to the ground. The count stooped hurriedly and picked it up, at the same time he gave one long eager look into the beautiful grave eyes that met his own. Sheba had never met such a look, and the quick blood rushed to her brow as she held out her hand for the flower.

"Nay, mademoiselle," he said in a low voice. "Let me keep it, I pray," and he placed it in his coat without waiting for a reply. Sheba felt terribly embarrassed. She was totally unused to language of compliment, or acts of gallantry. Would it be rude to refuse, she wondered; then seeing that the rose had been taken possession of she deemed it best to say nothing, so she only gave the Frenchman a little cold bow, and hurried on to join her mother and Bessie Saxton.

It happened that that astute young lady had just glanced back to see what was detaining her friend, and the little episode of the dropped rose had not escaped her.

"Well," she said, as they entered the brilliantly-lighted drawing-room, "you *are* getting on I must say. I should keep to one at a time if I were you. Don't you know the proverb about two stools?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Sheba quietly.

Bessie Saxton laughed—it was not a pleasant laugh. "Don't you," she said. "How very innocent you have become. However, don't let us quarrel; I want to have a long chat with you. Sit down here," and she drew a low cushioned chair beside her own. "Now tell me all you have been doing since you came to Sydney. But first, how do you like my dress?"

Sheba looked at it, or rather at where it ought to have been, and coloured warmly. "Doesn't it show too much—anatomy?" she said at last.

Bessie's cold blue eyes flashed angrily. "What a little idiot you are! What's the use of having a good neck and arms if one muffles them up as you do? But then of course you're thin!"

"I think," said Sheba in her old direct fashion, "that if I were fat, I should cover myself more."

"Why don't you say at once I look indecent?" snapped Bessie. "I hate hints."

"You asked me what I thought of you——"

"No, what you thought of my dress?"

"Oh, that's very pretty," said Sheba, "for the style of dress. But you know I have a horror of flounces and bustles. If you had ever studied the art drawings——"

"Oh! you little Puritan, do shut up!" snapped Miss Saxton with the pardonable vulgarity of friendship. "Why don't you make your mother wear high dresses? I'm sure she's old enough."

"She has her husband to advise her," said Sheba gravely. "Of course if he doesn't object, it is no business of mine."

"You don't seem to have altered much in mind or disposition," said Bessie, regarding her curiously, "though you're certainly grown out of all knowledge. But now tell me, who is this Count Pharamond?"

"I don't know," said Sheba; "I never heard of his existence till I came into the drawing-room."

"That wasn't a bad *coup* of yours," sneered her friend—"coming in just when we were all assembled. I suppose you thought you'd make a sensation?"

"I am sorry I was late," Sheba answered, with serene unconsciousness of a hidden meaning. "I had only a quarter-of-an-hour to dress in."

"You managed to do it very successfully," said Bessie, regarding her almost enviously. "Whose idea was it to have your gown made like that?"

"My own," said Sheba. "All my dresses are made so. But mother ordered this as a surprise; I never saw it till I put it on."

"It's effective," allowed Miss Saxton reluctantly. "But it would not suit everybody. You're such an odd-looking girl; perhaps you are sensible to adopt a style of your own, though it's rather—rather a strong-minded thing to do."

"Is it?" questioned Sheba. "I never thought about it in that way; I was looking over some volumes of art prints in the library



and I saw this style, and having found a little French dressmaker in the town who was very poor and very clever, I got her to modernize the idea, and if you only felt the comfort——”

“Oh, fancy thinking of comfort before fashion!” exclaimed Bessie. “Besides it would never suit me. You don’t wear corsets, do you?”

“Oh yes,” said Sheba. “But not those stiff hard steel and whalebone things you see in the shops. Toinette—that is the little Frenchwoman—makes them for me. They are quite soft and pliable, and you can move any way with them; as for waist, you know I never did care about that.”

“Mine,” said Miss Saxton with pardonable pride, “is only nineteen inches; yours looks about twenty-five.”

“Probably,” said Sheba, “it is. I never measured it. Yours is all wrong, though—quite out of proportion to the width of your shoulders. You will suffer for it some day.”

“Really,” said Miss Saxton, “I must say you talk the most insufferable nonsense! One would think you were studying for a doctor. I wish the men would come in. Now, when they do, pray content yourself with Noel Hill, and leave the Frenchman to me.”

“Certainly,” said Sheba laughing. “I haven’t the slightest wish to monopolize him. I don’t like him. I don’t like the way he looks into one’s eyes; it is so bold, so rude.”

“Phooh! it is only a way all Frenchmen have,” interrupted Bessie. “There comes in your prudery again. You’ll never get married with such ideas as those.”

“I don’t wish to get married,” said Sheba reddening.

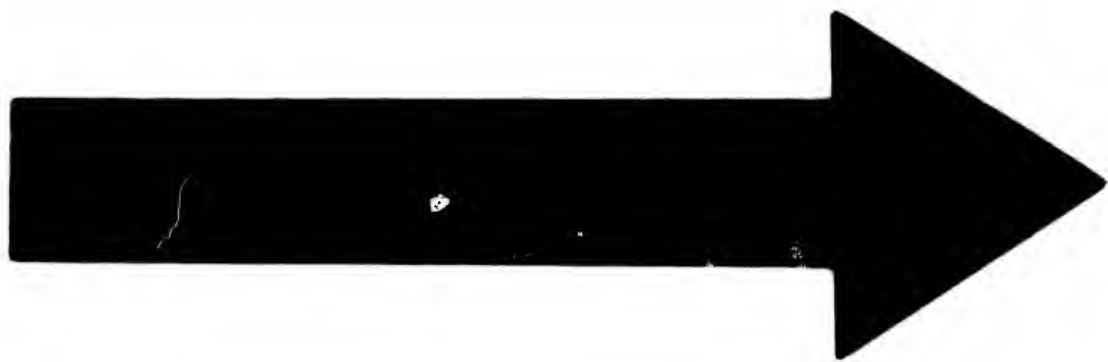
“My dear, that is nonsense,” laughed her friend. “It sounds as if—well, as if the grapes were sour. There’s nothing more hateful in life than an old maid.”

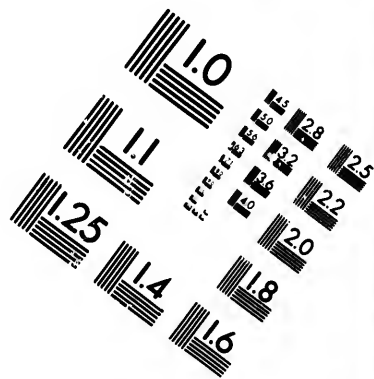
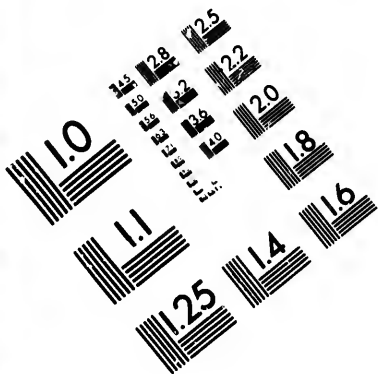
“Why should they be hateful?” asked Sheba, looking with her large serious eyes straight into her friend’s face.

That look somewhat dismayed Bessie. “Really,” she thought, “she *is* getting handsome—in a peculiar style; I don’t think it is a style that *takes*. Still one never knows.”

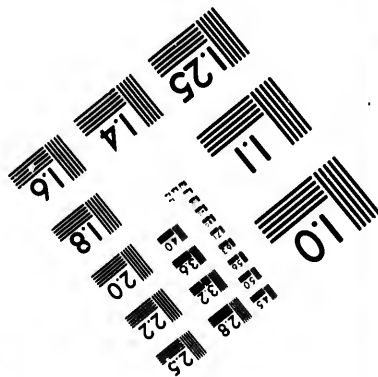
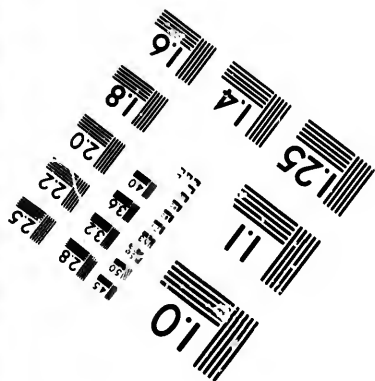
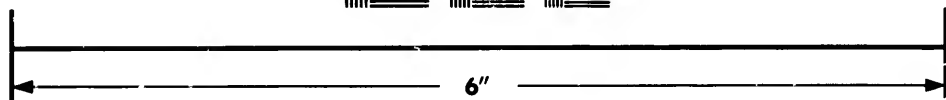
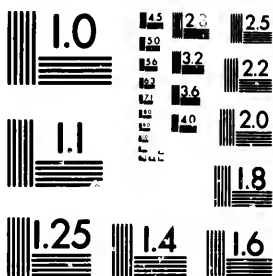
Aloud she said, “You are just as bad as ever, wanting to know the reason of everything. It bores people to have to explain. If you carry that habit with you into society, you will make more enemies than friends.”

“I’m sure I do not care,” said Sheba quietly. “I shall never live or act by rules laid down for me. Every one ought to think for themselves, and not accept everything the world teaches, merely because it *is* the world’s teaching.”





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"Gracious!" exclaimed Bessie in wonderment, "who's teaching you philosophy? That old Wandering Jew, as your mother calls him, whose child you educate?"

"Old—Wandering—Jew!" echoed Sheba in amazement. "The father of my little pupil is not old; he is quite young, in fact. He is the singer at the opera who has taken Riola's part. You know Riola, the great tenor, who is not expected to live."

"What!" almost shouted Bessie. "That splendid-looking man who did the 'Prophet' last night? Paoletti, I think, was his name. Well, you *have* kept it dark. Your mother doesn't know a word about it; she thinks it is that old German curiosity whose child you teach. Heavens! what a piece of luck. I'm dying to know him. You must introduce me. What's his real name?"

"Meredith," said Sheba, "Paul Meredith. The old German is a friend who lives with him." She spoke coldly and constrainedly. Bessie's tone and words jarred on her ear, and on that sensitive reverence she had for the wonderful singer, whose advent had been the great event of her life.

"Paul Meredith," echoed Bessie. "Well, only to think of your knowing him, and I've been crazy about the man ever since I heard him at the opera. You must get your mother to ask him here, and I'll come. I'd like to know what he is in private life. These public characters are sometimes awfully disappointing."

Sheba rose from her chair. Her face looked cold and disturbed. "I don't think he would come here," she said.

"Not come?" echoed Miss Saxton contemptuously. "You give him the chance, and see. If he refuses, ask your step-father to engage him to sing one evening. He's rich enough."

"What's that about papa being rich enough?" said a sharp little voice at her elbow. "I know he's rich—almost the richest man in all Sydney. He's going into Parliament soon." It was Miss Dolly, who had entered hanging on to Mrs. Levison, who had vainly endeavoured to keep her out of the drawing-room.

Bessie looked at the little flounced, dressed-up figure. "Oh, it's you, is it?" she said. ("Little horror!" she added, below her breath. "There'll be no peace now.")

"You've got a new dress on," began the little tormentor. "I don't think it's pretty, and it's cut awfully low; it's worse than mamma's, and hers is bad enough. I am sure if you asked the gentlemen they'd say you were both very rude."

"Dolly," interposed Mrs. Levison sharply, "be quiet. How dare you say such things?"

"Sheba told me always to speak the truth," said the little in corrigible, "and so I am speaking it. Your dresses——"

"I will send you out of the room if you don't hold your tongue," said her step-mother.

"I'll ask papa if I may come back," said Miss Dolly coolly, "and he's sure to let me. He's always good-tempered after a lot of wine."

Bessie Saxton laughed outright, despite her vexation.

Dolly was a little horror when her remarks became personal, but she really was awfully amusing.

"If our dresses don't please you," she said, "what do you think of Sheba's?"

"Oh! Sheba will never look like any one else," said the child. "She is like one of those pictures in the church windows—Vashti, isn't it, or Esther?—one of them, I know. Papa says she is a great deal more Jewish-looking than I am, and she won't wear so well; she is too dark. Why don't the gentlemen come in? What a time they are. I want to see the foreign count. What is he like? He is rich; oh! so rich. Mamma said what an admirable thing it would be for Sheba, if only he would take a fancy to her."

"Dolly!" almost screamed Mrs. Levison. "Will you be quiet!"

Sheba turned her face, pale and proud enough now, to her mother. She did not say anything, but a sharp pang of humiliation rent her heart.

So it was for this the feud had been patched up, the sceptre of peace extended. For *this* the affectionate note, the costly dress, had been sent to her. That she might find favour in the eyes of this rich stranger with the bold, watchful eyes; might make a good impression on him, so far as appearances went; be used as a bait to lure him to the house! A sense of shame and disgust came over her. She had thought her mother had been unhappy because of the differences between them; she had felt such a thrill of tenderness and remorse as she had read her note, and all the time that mother had been speculating as to how this stranger would regard her, and looking upon him as a possible means for ridding herself of an encumbrance.

Perhaps she judged her mother too harshly; but in any case the revulsion of feeling was for the time intense, and overpowered every other consideration. She felt like a trapped bird, and all the old wild rebellious thoughts surged back in a dark, continuous stream, and her brow grew dark and her eyes wrathful as the opening door revealed the figure of the new guest.

"She—make an impression—no fear of that," muttered Bessie Saxton as she watched that dark, gloomy face. "I know what

Frenchmen are ; they like wit, *verve*, brightness, *chic*. Upon my word I think I'll go in for him myself, as he's so rich."

She drew the lace tucker a little higher about her shapely shoulders, and fired a Parthian glance in the direction of Count Pharamond, who was standing some little distance off. Noel Hill had at once usurped Sheba, and she, nothing loth, had retreated with him to the farthest corner of the large room—effectually playing into her friend's hand, and vexing her mother excessively.

The count, apparently disregarding Miss Saxton's overtures, dropped into a seat beside his hostess.

"You will pardon me, madame," he said, "if I express my admiration for everything Australian, as displayed in your charming *ménage* ; most of all, for your exquisite young daughter. I have never seen anything like her—never."

Mrs. Levison coloured with gratified pride, under the thick coating of powder.

Did he really mean it? Was it possible that her plan was going to succeed? She glanced across at Sheba—what a fool the girl was to occupy herself with a penniless curate, when here were fortune and rank honouring her by admiration.

"You flatter her, count," she said in a fluttered voice. "She is, I suppose, different to your Parisian young ladies."

"Different!" The count raised his eyebrows. "Ah! that it was possible to express *how* different. Those divine features, that exquisite mouth, that serene, unconscious grace—*Ciel!* and what a sensation she would make in a Parisian *salon*. Might one be pardoned for asking who is the gentleman by her side who seemed so friendly, if one might say as much without offence?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Levison, "that is only her old teacher—tutor, I may say. He has known her since she was a child."

"A clergyman?" the count insinuated gravely.

"Yes, a clergyman," assented Mrs. Levison, gratified, if anything, that the count should seem a little uneasy. In the early stages of a love affair, jealousy is a great help, in the latter as great a hindrance.

"Then," the count resumed, "might he consider he had madame's gracious permission to call and still further pursue the too charming acquaintance of herself, and of her lovely daughter?"

Mrs. Levison's reply can be easily guessed. Having received it, Pharamond took himself off to Bessie Saxton's side, and rendered audacious by her ready encouragement, which she flattered herself was so *chic*, whispered flatteries, compliments and insinuations that brought the blood to her cheek, and for which her father

would have kicked him out of the house had he heard them, or understood the veiled significance of French phrases.

Mrs. Levison laid her head on her pillow that night with a sigh of content and relief. Providence had indeed been kind to her. Her scheme seemed almost ridiculously easy of fulfilment. Oh! what a triumph to marry Sheba to such a husband; and what an inexplicable, heavenly relief to think of her *as* married!

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

### A NEW IDEA.

THE next afternoon when Sheba came home, she found Count Pharamond established in the drawing-room, entertaining and being entertained by her mother.

The door was open, and she had looked in on passing, so there was no help but to enter and return the count's polite greeting.

He thought she looked quite as handsome as on the previous night. Her face was flushed with rapid exercise and the cool wind; her great eyes shone like stars beneath the dark velvet brim of her hat.

There was something eager and glad about the expression of her face, for she had just parted from Meredith, who had met her and walked half-way home with her. They had discussed many things, chiefly music; and he told her he should remain here with the company for at least two months more; if, after then, he had to proceed to Queensland, he should leave the child with old Müller, so as not to interrupt his studies.

"You are doing him so much good," he had added gratefully. "He is not so dull or old-fashioned as he used to be, and he talks of you so much. I think you have quite won his heart."

As she shook hands with Count Pharamond those words were still ringing in her ears.

She felt too happy to be distant and cold, as on the previous night, and though she avoided his eyes, and felt his compliments jar on her ear, she yet was gracious enough to satisfy her mother.

In his way Count Pharamond was a brilliant and cultivated man, a man of the world and of society such as Sheba and her mother had never entered—the light, frothy, brilliant society of French *salons*, and London drawing-rooms, and clubs.

He talked to them of celebrated people, of art, fashion, politics; talked well and brilliantly, but with a certain superficial polish that Sheba's keen ear detected.



Still it was pleasant to hear of that great world from which the ocean separated her, and of people whose names were only familiar to her through newspaper gossip or the medium of their own works: Dickens, Thackeray, Lever, George Eliot; these great names were rattled over by the glib tongue of Pharamond as if they were those of everyday personal acquaintances.

He had anecdotes of each, amusing or interesting, as the case might be. But nothing interested Sheba so much as to hear of George Eliot, whose "Mill on the Floss" she had just been re-reading in, and of whose history she was entirely ignorant.

She noted as she put her eager questions that her mother and the count exchanged looks, that Mrs. Levison seemed fidgety and uncomfortable, and that Pharamond himself began to fence with her simple, direct inquiries, and gradually changed the subject.

However, he had contrived to make half-an-hour pass very quickly and pleasantly, and Sheba had almost forgotten her antagonism of the previous night.

When her mother pressed him to come again, Sheba eagerly seconded the invitation. "And you must tell me more of my adored authoress," she cried enthusiastically. "I would sooner be Marian Evans than the Queen on her throne!"

"Ah!" murmured the count, as he held the small warm hand for a moment in his own. "Ah, mademoiselle! the faiths, the enthusiasms of youth. How I envy you them. They are so beautiful—while they last."

"I hope," said Sheba gravely, "mine will last always."

Then he bowed low again, and the door closed on him, and Sheba tossed off her hat, and smoothed back the thick, heavy hair above her brow. Mrs. Levison looked at her with something of impatience and irritation in her glance.

"I do wish, Sheba," she said, "that you had not such an unfortunate knack of stumbling on questionable subjects for conversation. I positively blushed when you would persist in talking of that—writer—to the count, and he was most uncomfortable. There has been quite a scandal about her in England. A woman who has no religion, who makes her intellect her God—believes in free love, and has gone to live with a man who has left his own wife and family for her sake. These are the simple facts, and every one knows them. Men of course make a fuss over her, because she is clever; but no *lady* would visit her, she lives quite apart from society."

"She ought to be glad of that and to write much better for it," said Sheba. "I don't know what use society is to an author or an artist, except to distract and bore them."

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Levison tartly, "you don't see any use in morality either. One would think so to hear you talk. I can't think where you pick up your extraordinary ideas—unless that old curiosity whose child you teach, is entertaining you with some of his."

"Mother," said the girl, suddenly growing very pale, "you never asked me *whose* child I am teaching; you would not listen to anything I said on the subject, but you are wrong if you think it is the old German, Herr Müller, who is my—my employer. The child I teach is the son of Mr. Paul Meredith, who sings at the opera."

"I'm sure I don't care," snapped Mrs. Levison. "It doesn't make the fact of your teaching any better; rather worse, if anything. You ought to be ashamed to go on with this foolish scheme, knowing how we disapprove of it. Hex is coming home next week on purpose to speak to you about it. I am in perfect terror lest Count Pharamond should hear of it. What would he think?"

"It doesn't concern me what he or any one else thinks," said Sheba proudly. "You know my reasons for doing this. If you want to blame any one, blame your husband; he has always disliked me and insulted me. This place has never been a home—never."

"You are so headstrong, so ungrateful," lamented Mrs. Levison. "I'm sure you will break my heart yet."

Sheba turned to her with a sudden impulse of tenderness.

"Don't say that, mother," she pleaded; "I do love you, and I wish I could please you, but this marriage of yours has put a gulf between us; nothing is as it was. Your husband dislikes me; Dolly persecutes me; and you—you think everything I do is wrong." The tears had brimmed into her eyes, her lips trembled. Mrs. Levison rose impatiently.

"Oh! make me no scenes, for goodness' sake, child," she said. "You are too old to be punished for disobedience; you must take your own way; only I shall never be the same to you so long as you keep up this foolish idea of teaching. I consider you are degrading yourself and me."

Then she left the room to avoid further controversy, and Sheba sank slowly down on the chair beside her, and leaning her head on her hands, sat for long gazing into the clear wood fire that burned on the hearth. The old cry was sounding in her ears—the cry that had embittered her childhood and darkened her youth: "No one cares for me, no one wants me; oh! why was I ever born?"

There was not even a dumb creature now to rub its soft head against her knee, or speak out love with bright wistful eyes as Billy had been wont to do. They had all been offered up as a sacrifice to Mr. Levison's splendid house—that house where her coming or going gladdened no one—concerned no one—save she was needed for some selfish scheme.

"They would be glad to be rid of me," she thought bitterly. "Dolly was quite right in what she said. This man must have been asked here for a purpose. They would like him to marry me, perhaps." She shuddered as she thought of the bold eyes, the smiling sensual lips. "Never," she told herself; "I would sooner die." A voice at her ear startled her—a voice repeating her own words which unconsciously she had spoken aloud.

"Sooner die than—what, Miss Sheba? It is a terrible alternative!"

She sprang to her feet blushing and confused. Beside her stood Noel Hill.

"*You*," she cried gladly. "Why, how did you come? I never heard you."

"No, you were too deep in thought. The servant showed me in; she said your mother was dressing, so I fear it is rather late for a conventional call. Still, I am glad to find you are visible."

"Sit down," said Sheba, drawing a chair near to the fire. "It is very cold this evening; one of these dreadful southerly winds. You look tired; where have you been?"

"Doing parish work," he said, taking the chair and watching the girl's graceful movements as she stirred the fire into a blaze and lit the lamp near by. "This is a very different place to West Shore," he went on presently, "and my rector is not very energetic, so a great deal devolves on me."

"I know Mr. Ransom by repute, as well as personally through his services and sermons," said Sheba. "What a curious man he is to be in the Church."

"There are many curious men in the Church," said Noel Hill smiling, "and always will be," he added more seriously, "as long as such things as advowsons and gifts of livings exist. But tell me, what was disturbing you just now, and what would you rather die than do?"

"Marry a man I disliked, and could not respect," said Sheba, colouring warmly beneath the gaze of those clear, searching eyes.

"Marry!" echoed Noel Hill, and his face grew a shade paler. "Has anything been said to you about—about that?"

"Mother would only be too thankful if any eligible suitor would offer," said the girl bitterly. "I foresee many more battles

in store for me ; I am like a square peg in a round hole here ; I have never fitted my place and I never shall."

The young clergyman looked at her somewhat sadly.

"I was so in hopes that matters were better," he said. "Are you sure that you try to make the best of your position ; bring your will more into subjection to theirs ?"

"Why should I do that ?" burst out Sheba impetuously. "I am not a child any longer. I know right from wrong, and shams from reality, and this house is full of shams ; even my brother is quite changed : there is not a genuine feeling or impulse allowed. Every one tries to deceive some one else. Mother, Mr. Levison ; Mr. Levison, mother ; the child, her father and her step-mother both ; and the united family, the world at large, which they call society. I will not do it ; I never have and I never shall. If I don't like these vulgar, purse-proud people who come here, why should I pretend I do ? They don't like me, I know. My mother says it is my fault, and perhaps it is ; but I find books more interesting than persons, and therefore I won't leave the library to waste my evenings listening to the scandals and gossip of a set of money-worshipping Jews. It makes me sick to hear them talk," she went on impetuously. "Mrs. Abrahams abusing Mrs. Levi ; and Mrs. Levi criticizing Mrs. Moss, and her dress, and her house, and her servants ; and each of them summing up their neighbours' incomes to a penny, and estimating the success of their entertainments by the amount of money spent on them ; and this is the life I am expected to live."

"It is hard," said Noel Hill thoughtfully. He was trying to grasp the fact that this girl had got beyond his teaching and authority ; that she was a woman now, with a woman's soul, and that life was getting harder for her than even he had ever feared it would be. "Very hard," he went on thoughtfully, "but still, they cannot force you to marry any one you do not care for. Is there—is there any one they specially wish you to accept ?"

"Oh !" said Sheba blushing hotly, "I have only Dolly's word for that, and you know what *she* is."

"Yes," he said, laughing with a sudden sense of relief. "I shall never forget the way in which she entertained me on the occasion of my first visit. It is a pity the child should be spoiled for the want of training."

"She will never get that at home," said Sheba. "Her father indulges her in everything, and mother gives way because it makes things smooth ; she is a little demon for mischief-making, and she repeats all she hears with any amount of exaggeration."

"Indeed, I am afraid your home is far from pleasant," said

Noel Hill slowly. "Let us hope, however, that things may mend. Are you still bent on teaching?"

"Yes," Sheba answered decidedly. "It is my one pleasure now. It does take me out of my life for a few hours at all events."

"I have been thinking," he said, "of a plan which will give you occupation and relief too. You remember telling me long ago about your admiration for women authors? Why don't you try to write? You have talent, keen perception of character, vivid imagination and great natural facility in the putting together of ideas and fancies. Think of it. I don't say that you will succeed in doing anything very remarkable just at first, but I should strongly advise you to make the effort."

"And then——" said Sheba, rising and facing him with flushed cheeks and eager eyes.

"Then," he said, as he also rose at sound of the dressing bell, "we might see about publishing. I have a friend who is junior partner in a large publishing firm in London; if your book was worth anything he could tell me so; in any case the scheme is worth a trial."

"Worth it! I should think so," cried the girl eagerly. "How good of you to think of it. I shall never be dull or lonely now."

"Indeed, I hope so," said Noel Hill earnestly. "Your mind is too active, it must not be allowed to feed upon itself; give it employment and I think you will be less discontented, even if not positively happy."

"Happy!" said the girl with a long deep sigh. "Ah! shall I ever be—that? Sometimes I doubt it."

The young man's heart gave a sudden swift throb as he met those dark passionate eyes. The thought that had sprung to life, echoed on and on long after he had left that girlish presence:

"Would to Heaven I could make you so."

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## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### A LITTLE DUST.

SHEBA went straight to her room as the door closed on Noel Hill. She felt she must be alone to think out the magnitude of the idea presented to her.

The possibility of writing had often floated dimly through her mind, but she had deemed herself, as yet, far too ignorant and impetuous to do anything deserving the honour of authorship, or publication.

It was no light thing to undertake, for nothing shallow or superficial would ever have contented her; but she felt that her ignorance of the world, and of life, and the narrow limits of her own experience were all against her.

Yet had not the Brontës lived out of the world, in a wild, lonely country district, and surrounded by all that was hard, unlovely and commonplace? Had not her adored Marian Evans been only a farmer's daughter, and brought up in a dull Methodist circle? Had not the great Charles Dickens himself begun life as a lawyer's clerk? Yet each and all had burst the trammels of their surroundings, and made their mark. True, they had all possessed genius of no common order, and she—she was but a young ignorant, scarce-educated colonist; still she felt she had it within her to dare and to achieve. She loved work, and was ready to plunge into it heart and soul. It promised her a rich feast of mental dissipation. It was the one thing that could atone for the emptiness of home; she might rise above it and its petty troubles, and make for herself a deeper, broader life, that would dwarf into insignificance the mere routine of duties and occupations such as most women lived for.

All these thoughts swept like an impetuous tide through her mind, and for a time took no definite shape. But after a while a little chill crept over that first ardour of enthusiasm. How was she to begin? What form or shape was her work to take for itself?

She pushed the heavy hair from her brow, which ached with feverish excitement and the strain of long thought.

"I will ask Herr Müller," she said to herself. "He is so clever. He will be able to advise me."

Then she changed her dress, and went down into the library to read quietly till dinner was over, and after that went into the drawing-room, where a small coterie of Coihens and Leveys were assembled, and, at her mother's request, sang and played for them, as she very rarely condescended to do. It was better than cards, she told herself, and she could think without being interrupted by the perpetual chatter respecting money and dress, or domestic news, which last always took the shape of a prospective, or just completed addition to the tribe of Israel, on the part of one or other of its fruitful vines.

She slept but little that night; and being too conscientious to neglect a duty for any personal interest, she gave her young charge his usual lessons before ever broaching the subject which filled her thoughts to Herr Müller.

"I wanted to consult you," she said at last, as little Paul trotted

off to fetch his coat and cap for their usual walk, "if you could spare me a few moments."

The old man looked up from his music-copying. "Consult me? but certainly, *mein Fräulein*. If you like, I will put on my hat, and we shall take our walks together."

It was an odd thing about Franz Müller, that when excited or interested on any subject, he could talk fluently and with scarcely any foreign idioms, but in ordinary fragmentary conversation his German nationality proclaimed itself at once.

"Will you come with us?" cried Sheba eagerly. "Oh! that is kind of you; I have been longing for a talk."

"I thought," said the old man laughing, "that our last talk had frightened you. You want no more Buddhism I suppose, eh?"

"Indeed," said Sheba indignantly, "I was not frightened. I would like to hear a great deal more on the subject. But, no, it was not of that I wished to speak." And she told him briefly, and as calmly as she could, the suggestion of Noel Hill, and her own great longing to comply with it.

He listened attentively and seriously, looking ever and again at the glowing eager face with its changeful expressions. What an ardent, eager, enthusiastic soul this was! He sighed to think of what its future might be. He had known so many enthusiasts, so many gifted minds, and of them all none had passed through the world's furnace unscathed, few the better for the ordeal.

"To write," he said thoughtfully; "well, I have considered often you might do that, and do it well. If you feel it within you, it must come out. Only I advise but one thing, never write unless you have something to say that is worth saying. There is too much mediocrity in everything now-a-days. Every one wants to rush into print with their trash, or their errors, or their filth, as the case may be. Literature is a vast sewer into which the ignorant and the vile, as well as the scholar and the thinker, pour their several contributions, and the filter which might be of use in carrying those contributions to the mind of the public, *viz.*, press censorship, is rapidly becoming useless by reason of interests, bribes, ignorance, prejudice, and the like. You are very young, and of life you know nothing. Your soul is as clear as your eyes. The deceits and coquetries and pruriences of your sex are a sealed book as yet. There is a gospel of worldly wisdom, which is the very essence of selfishness, and you have never turned of it one leaf. Of what then would you write? Of what is in your own pure soul; great thoughts, impossible dreams such as poets love. You will sing to deaf ears, *mein Fräulein*. The world doesn't heed, and doesn't want to heed, and you will waste your brains,

and your health, and break your tender heart—for I think it is tender, though you seem so cold—and all for nothing.”

Sheba grew very pale. Her eyes, troubled and tear-filled, looked out at the vista of green fields and waving trees, and a sense of heavy desolation and despair oppressed her.

“You would not advise me to try?” she said at last.

His quick ear noticed the trembling of her voice, and he knew his words had hurt her, and felt sorry.

“I never give advice,” he said gently. “It is a thing people only ask for when their minds are made up what they shall do; but frankly, of women’s work I have not much opinion. They lack the patience, the steadiness, the studious thought, which mark the capacity of man’s brains. True, there have been clever women, but then they lacked most feminine charms, and became notorious as much for personal eccentricity as for so-called genius. They have never done anything great in art, save as copyists or executants. They lack creative power, or we should have had a female Beethoven or Michael Angelo by this time.”

“There has been Properzia of Bologna,” suggested Sheba timidly.

“One instance to quote against hundreds, my dear. Where is the female prototype of Praxiteles or Raffaele, of Rubens or Angelico, Sophocles, Homer, Virgil, or to come to later days, Shakespeare, or Shelley, or Byron? It cannot be found. It never *will* be found, even though we throw open our academies and colleges and art schools, as they begin to cry to us to do.”

“Still,” persisted Sheba, “they have done something. They may do more with better training and education.”

He laughed grimly. “They will write sensational fiction, whose doubtful morality enlightens one sex and disgusts the other. They will paint pretty feeble pictures of babies and animals and flowers, or dabble in sculpture with a due care for drapery and fringes and buttons! That I grant you, more—I will say ten years hence.”

“You are not encouraging,” said Sheba disappointedly.

“Nay, I but speak in my plain, gruff, German fashion. I said before, if you feel it within you to write, do it, and do your best; and do not haste too much, but give nothing forth to the world that has not on it the stamp of care and earnest thought. In any case work won’t harm you. Perhaps it may be a safety valve.”

She laughed. The colour came back to her face and lips. “I mean *to try*,” she said with a flash of the dark starry eyes. “And I will take your advice, I will not hurry over my work.”

“You will spoil your youth,” grumbled the old man. “Without pleasure and gaiety, the life of the young is like a spring flower



that an early frost has frozen ere it is fully opened. Be content as you are; you will be a beautiful woman one day. Men will love you. You may be a happy wife, with love in your heart and children at your breast. That is the best life for a woman. Nature meant it, and she is wiser than man, and kinder too, if we would but believe it."

Sheba's face grew warm. She thought of love as her childish dreams had pictured it. Alas! those dreams now looked so far away that she scarcely could realize them, as having played an important part in her life.

"I think," she said gravely, "I shall not be a woman whom men will love. I do not wish it."

He smiled, his odd grim smile.

"That," he said, "is probably a reason why *they* will. But time will show."

They walked on in silence for some moments. Presently he said:

"Did any one suggest this to you, or was it a thought, a desire, of your own?"

"I thought of it years ago," said Sheba colouring, "but it seemed to have gone out of my mind till a friend, the clergyman of whom I spoke to you, suggested it to me again."

"Ah," said the old man, "what is he like, this clergyman; young, clever, or conventional?"

"I think," said Sheba, "he is very good. He is not a bit like a clergyman."

"Not stiff, and solemn, and canting, eh?" asked the German grimly.

"No," she said readily, "far otherwise. He is very clever, I think, and he works very hard."

The old man nodded. "Ask him," he said, with one of his odd smiles, "to explain to you the doctrine of the Trinity. Ask him, too, what priesthood has done for religion, save hamper and distort any purity or truth it once possessed."

"Do you think," Sheba asked timidly, "that our clergy, the clergy of the Reformed Church, are no better than the Roman Catholic priests?"

He laughed aloud, and his eyes flashed beneath their thick grey brows.

"Do I *believe*? Oh, child, child, if I could make you see for one moment the mass of lies, follies and superstitions that embroider the priestly garment, whether white, or violet, or black; whether the bishop's snowy surplice, or the cardinal's scarlet robe! What is underneath? Man—a man mortal, erring, sinful as any

other. What has sanctified him? why is he holy, and all the rest of mankind vile? Because another anointed official has laid hands on him! Five hundred years ago the world believed that the pillars of Hercules marked the western boundaries of the earth. There are antiquities of doctrine and faith just as absurd, for which so-called holy men fight tooth and nail to this very day. They would, if they *could*, govern the whole human race by the rigid letter of ecclesiastical law. Fortunately they cannot. Their day has gone by. The cry of the age is progress—and progress no longer means submissive acquiescence in what has been laid down dogmatically in bygone years of superstition. The mind of man is struggling out of swaddling bands, and demands to walk alone on a path of knowledge commensurate with its wants. The voice of the pulpit alone holds it back, crying, ‘Refrain, oh, impious one! Question not, seek not, doubt not. Thus far and no farther shall inquiry go!’ . . . The babe is fed on milk, the child on faith; but shall milk and faith diet the body and the mind of man? True, there may be things which that mind and soul never shall know, but there is no reason why they should not *seek* to know. Yet the very class who should be able to instruct the earnest and the investigating, is the class who have ever striven to keep them in dire ignorance, simply to maintain a superiority on their own side. The world was created in six days, that is what every child is told, and generally believes. The fact of eating an apple was the introduction of sin, and the curse of the human race. The God of Heaven fought in a personal, bloodthirsty manner with the armies of men, and gloried in the tortures of the very beings He had created. The waters of a mighty sea rolled back in order to annihilate a foe whose hearts this same God expressly states *He* had purposely hardened. The sun stood still to please a Jewish priest, and give time for inordinate slaughter, and went back on a dial to establish the faith of a sick king. One inspired ruler writes his own death; and a perpetually quoted prophet speaks with a personal knowledge of events that cover a period of two hundred or three hundred years. Some books of prophecy are in fact the work of several writers, *not* of one. But the clergy, who are the professed students of the Bible, were the last to discover or acknowledge that. Heaven knows whom they were afraid of. Their own heads and chiefs most probably, who hold the prospects of advancement and the pomposity of office. Nothing must be altered, all must continue on the old safe cut-and-dry lines; no controversy, no discussion, no argument; blind belief and blinder submission; God, so it seems to me, being represented to men in *their* own image now, just as He was in the old ignorant

days, when it is written, 'He talked and walked, and fought, and commanded, and punished, and avenged.' He loved and hated; was jealous and angry, and to all intents and purposes was a being very like those who professed to have almost personal acquaintance with Him."

"If all you say is true," sighed Sheba miserably, "what *is* there to believe? It is hard to give up all faith in what one has learnt and accepted. In the light in which you look at the Bible and religion, nothing seems true or trustworthy."

"You could find plenty that is both," he said, "if you had waited to study it for yourself, not learnt to read it by man's literal interpretation. Hard—well, it is hard, and no doubt I seem to you as a devil tempting. That is why we will teach Paul nothing. He shall at least have no foolish fables clinging to memory, when he is old enough to choose for himself."

"I wish," said Sheba, "you knew Noel Hill. I wonder what he would say to your assertions."

"Bring him to me," said the old German with a gruff laugh. "I should like it. I have fought many a battle with priests of all persuasions. They always had to beat a retreat. Mostly they take shelter under the wing of faith. What can't be explained up to a certain point must be received in faith; the faith of a little child at his mother's knee who accepts 'Cerentola' and the 'Giant Killer' as real personages. Faith—Bah! Was there ever so heavy a stone rolled at the gate of inquiry? Faith! where would the world be now if science had only been content with faith? If Galileo had simply said, 'You must believe the earth goes round the sun because I—say so;' or Columbus, 'You must believe there is another continent, though I haven't found it;' or the discoverer of electric force, 'You must believe there is a mighty and wonderful current, which will bridge space and laugh at barriers of sea and land; which is light and heat, and life and death; but I can't *show* you its power, or its use.' The mind of man is so constituted that it must be convinced of a thing before accepting it as truth; but the mind of childhood is not so. Hence the reason why your clergy are so eager for the baptism of infants, the (to them) still more important rite of Confirmation, ere ever the young mind has really thought or considered the importance of what it professes. Once in the Church, they say 'All is safe with your future' . . . There are people who believe that the mere fact of a child being baptized means its salvation. I suppose it has never occurred to them to wonder what has become of the souls of the unbaptized millions who lived before the rite was instituted: *nun da hö. t alles auf!* a people who accept a service with the

thirty-nine articles, the Athanasian creed, and the commination curses would accept anything! *Wir lassen sie bleiben!*"

Sheba was silent and disturbed; for some moments they walked on without speaking. Presently they came in sight of little Paul; he was standing still, looking at something which he held in his hand. It was a butterfly.

"Look, Sheba," he cried as the girl paused beside him—he had from the first decided that the surname of his governess was far too long for daily use—"I've found such a lovely butterfly!" He opened his hand. The insect lay there crushed and lifeless. His little face grew grave. "Oh!" he said sorrowfully, "where is it? What has become of it?"

"It is dead," said Sheba, "it was cruel of you to crush the poor thing in your little hot hand."

"Won't it fly again?" he asked eagerly. "Won't it ever—ever fly again? Is that why it's dead?"

"Yes," said the girl gently.

"And where is what made it alive?" he went on. "I haven't got that, have I? There is only a little dust in my hand."

"That is so, *mein Liebling*," said the old German, "you have solved the secret of all ended life: a little dust, no more, no less; just—a little dust."

The child let the dead insect fall from his hand. His eyes looked wistfully up to the two faces above him. "And then——" he said.

Sheba turned aside to hide the tears in her eyes. The old man looked troubled.

"Nay, ask no questions," he said at last. "What matters when all is over? Sleep, rest, or work that still goes on. We shall know soon enough."

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## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### "WHAT LIFE MIGHT BE."

It is not to be supposed that such a mind and such teachings as those of Franz Müller, could be without serious influence on such a nature as Sheba Ormatroyd's. She had been brought up to accept a narrow code of doctrine, restricted almost harshly from all inquiry or explanation, and until she knew Noel Hill the real truth or meaning of Christianity had been as much of a dead letter to her as it is, sad to say, to ninety-nine of every hundred children in Christian families. It is not their fault. What their

parents were taught, they teach again, sect for sect, each upholding its own petty creed as superior to all others, and scarcely ever troubling to look below the surface of such pharisaical forms as family prayers and regular church-going. As for the clergy, what do they know, individually, of the souls that are their ostensible charge? What do they teach—or rather, what can they teach—beyond the stereotyped doctrines they, in their day, learned also from their parents' lips, and accepted in after life as infallible truth, to be disseminated and re-taught by themselves, with such additions or alterations as a little knowledge of Greek or Hebrew will permit?

They preach of sowing the seed, but they seldom inquire what harvest their teaching has garnered. They visit their parish and discuss religious subjects, condescendingly or deferentially, according to the social state of the parishioners. They eat, drink, and are merry, and they keep a watchful eye on the loaves and fishes, yet all the while inveigh against the vanity of worldly pleasures, and the deceitfulness of riches. For a class of men who invariably marry rich wives, or wives with relatives possessed of interest in the matter of advowsons, this is somewhat inconsistent. They preach humility, yet who so bullies and works the poor curate as that same humility-preaching rector? They preach self sacrifice, and point the moral by asking for large offertories for charities, to which they personally contribute—prayers alone; they demand church decoration and embellishment, which is only a glorification of their own special edifice. "Deny yourself a few dinners, an extra carriage-horse, and provide altar cloths and put in a new painted window for *me*." This in plain words is the meaning of delicately-worded suggestions as to doing God honour, and proving the reality of Christian professions.

Oh, for a fan to purge, and a whirlwind to sweep away the monstrous accumulation of hypocrisy and false teaching that shames the very name of Christianity. Oh, for voice bold enough, and heart brave enough, to speak out the truth, and nothing but the truth, in high places as in low; in the palaces of the great, as in the cottages of the poor. Truth that should echo in the drawing-rooms of society's pampered herds as bravely as from the pulpit, which forms so safe a vantage-ground. Strip off my lady's satin and pearls, and my lord's robes of state; the ball-room's dainty gossamer and fine broadcloth; divest my lord cardinal of his scarlet robes, and my lord archbishop of his lawn and lace, and cry aloud: Be men and women of one earnest, zealous faith—the faith that speaks a common humanity—a living, seeking, struggling soul, that no trappings can disguise, and no luxury can

satisfy. Unite, and solve into one common large-hearted brotherhood, that seeks for each and all, the best and the truest. Be no longer blind and deaf to all belief, save the narrow special creed which accident has made your own. Preach that love is the fulfilling of the law, and *practise* it individually; not in a selfish spasmodic fashion here and there, but as if it were a truism taken into *each* life however humble, or however great, and in each *faithfully* performed. Brief is the day of human life, and of the night that follows who shall speak with any certainty? Who, whether saint, or prophet, or martyr, has come back to tell us of the Great Beyond? To tell us with such absolute conviction that we can face death unflinchingly, saying: "I *know*—and am not afraid."

Does any one pause in life's busy march, to ask themselves: "Who am I? Whence do I come? Whither am I going? I shall not always sleep and rise, eat and drink, dress and gossip, and slave for money, and weep over falsehood, and see the vanity of men's words, and of women's beauty, and the cruelty of death, and the sins and weariness of life; not always—not perhaps for long, and then——"

Ah, *then*—that one little word holds all the wonder that nothing satisfies. Neither church-going, nor district-visiting, nor early celebrations, nor the voice of many preachers; nay, sometimes not even the words of the Great Book itself, though in it there lies the grain of truth that men have heaped over with dust of doctrines, and well-nigh buried beneath mis-translations; that has been used as a license from Heaven for all the malignity and fiendish brutality of persecution; that has served Jew and Gentile, priest and prophet, sceptic and saint, visionary and infidel, men of all creeds, and men of none; that, I say, has served each and all of these in turn, so wide is the margin of its teaching, so varied the utility of its contents.

Then—chill as the touch of death's angel, weighty as the stone at the sepulchre, that little word bars the way to promised realms of bliss and vague dreams of celestial glory. Then—rise up and array yourselves, oh, misspent hours and wasted days! oh, cold, hard words, that lie heavy as lead on many a loving heart, and chill many a tender memory. Petty actions; deeds that seemed pious and unselfish, but which we know now to have been vain-glories and full of foolish pride! Rise up, arrays of family quarrels, and cruel divisions; bigoted faiths that in the name of a God of mercy showed neither mercy nor toleration to any dissenting soul; harsh mandates that drove the erring and the weak to ruin or to death. Rise up, too, oh, half-uttered truths, more cruel than

any lies ; and you, oh sin best-loved of powers of evil and surest weapon in the fearful armoury of hell, the pride that apes humility. One and all your seeds are scattered broadcast over an earth that was once as fair as we fain picture Heaven ; and one and all, you have your root in every life that lives, and rule with iron sceptre that blurred distorted image that once bore its Creator's stamp of perfection.

To one and all the truth comes soon or late ; are there few or many to whom it comes with a cry sad as the sigh from Calvary. "Ye might, but ye would not !"

That is the secret of each heart ; there lies the chance of better things breathed into the folded bud of each new life, to blossom beneath the sun of purity, or perish beneath the chill frosts of evil. "Ye might, but ye would not." Who that looks back on even a score of human years, but hears those words ring out the knell of many a sad mistake, many a heartless deed. Such a little thing could have prevented the mistake ; would have altered the deed. Such a little thing. But it is too late now. The error has borne its fatal fruit, the cruel act has perchance rolled a gravestone of silence between sufferer and inflictor. For each comes but the unavailing plaint : "Ye might, and ye would not."

Life has its duties, and we may not shirk their obligations any more than we may recklessly cast aside that life itself, be it ever so burdensome.

Side by side with the days and years march the opportunities of each for good, or for evil. It is a solemn thought, but one too often lightly regarded. Science looks far into the future, it cannot stay to lift the beggar from his misery. Philosophy bends grey head and dim eyes over the labours of thought ; it hears not the cry for bread at its door. Religion speaks vaguely of beatitude in a future state, of patience under trial in this ; seldom does it go out of its priestly way to clothe the naked, and feed the hungry, or protect the orphan. It seems, indeed, as if each art and profession lived but for itself and its own petty triumphs, while all the great ills of life and all its mistakes and necessities are left unheeded, as they always have been left, by the great majority. Is it any wonder that selfishness takes deeper root, and evil flourishes rank and poisonous in congenial soil, despite a feeble remonstrance here and there ? To our shame, be it said, despite also the advance of culture and religion. The problem of virtue lies at the root of all moral problems, and it concerns those who profess religious opinions just as much as those who do not. But "how to be virtuous ?" asks man of his teachers.

The Church bids him love God, and live only for His service.

Science and philosophy, worshipping their idol of "reason," say, "Virtue is the performance of such acts as shall benefit your fellow man." Rationalism teaches that "virtue is the avoidance of such things as are harmful, individually or collectively," so that a sin might be a virtue if the action of lying, or stealing, or murder were beneficial, instead of the reverse. Virtue is unselfishness, says one creed, yet selfishness is in itself a law of individual life—the life that has to be fed, and clothed, and cared for, and whose needs are too imperative to be gainsaid. If we come to define conscious existence, we find selfishness its very essence; it is only harmful when carried to excess; and made the rule of each thought and action that fills the petty sphere of individual life.

Virtue, again, presented as a scientific theory, is only attainable by rising out of that same petty sphere of individual life, and surveying the whole race of mankind as a brotherhood and treating it as such. Yet if science only allows to that vast brotherhood its short span of human life, there is more of melancholy than of hope in the prospect. It needs a wide faith and a deep hope to look beyond, and yet again beyond, and yet trust for the ultimate happiness of the erring souls that emanate from one source of universal life, and yet have almost lost all likeness to that source, and all kinship to that spirit.

Virtue, or that semblance of goodness which we call virtue, is relative to the whole of the great human body, but it often fails to take root in the heart even though it sways the intellect. To do both, it must represent God's will to man's conscience, and impress his spiritual as well as his material condition. Then the importance of earth's "to-day" is no longer narrowed into mere material well-being, with nothing beyond but the grim gates of death.

It is of little use to preach virtue and never practise it, to warn and not assist, to entreat others to beware of offences, yet live a life pointing a very different moral, and causing either directly or indirectly those very offences to exist. It has been said, that if every man who draws the breath of life would only do a little good to each fellow creature with whom friendship or kinship unites him in a common band of associations, he would be also doing an inestimable good for the great mass of humanity, and conferring a far greater benefit on such humanity than it receives in the aggregate from some sacrifice or martyrdom that has been impulsive and irrational, even though it seems heroic. It doesn't seem a hard thing to do a *little* good in each life; something to help another life whose fellowship brightens the dull prose of existence;



but it is *each* life, not one here and there that must do it, ere the benefit is felt, or the effect acknowledged.

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Some such thoughts as these ran riot in the mind of Sheba Ormatroyd for many days after that long discussion with Müller ; all was chaos and disorder in her soul ; one faith had slipped away and there was no other to take its place. She dimly felt what life might be, and what religion might make of it, but she knew that it was, in reality, widely different. The helplessness and hopelessness of it all saddened and embittered her ; in no time of her life had she been in such terrible danger, and yet she was quite unconscious of the fact.

The old German himself never guessed what harm he had done ; with what a devastating blast his chill philosophies had blown over that untrained, yet fruitful mind-garden of the young girl for whom he had so kindly a friendship. She had asked, and he had answered. It did not occur to him to question results.

He had read so much, and studied so deeply, and thought so earnestly, that his mind was like a huge rough giant, towering over the feeble pigmies of most intellects with which he came in contact. To one who had made himself familiar from youth up with such works as those of Kant, Schopenhauer, Strauss, Ranke, Gervinus, Hegel, Mosheim ; the doctrines of Luther and Calvin ; the history of ancient and modern religions, with all their terrible array of dogmas, and their debasing cruelties and persecutions, it was no wonder that a child's faith in what he termed the "nursery stories of Christianity" seemed weak and foolish, and of no account.

Each mind has its own secret temple of worship ; perhaps the old German philosopher had his, though he would not acknowledge it, and worshipped there at the shrine of reason, with complete satisfaction to himself. The name of Christianity signified nothing to him but a narrow, hard creed, whose professors were bitter foes to any variance of opinion, or any deep and persistent inquiry. He had heard wranglings innumerable over the Bible, and discussions on the Fall, the Atonement, the Incarnation and the Resurrection, till the very words had grown hateful and robbed of anything like sacred meaning. Priests were ready to fight tooth and nail over some petty formula that invested them with temporary importance, while on the threshold of the Church stood shivering souls hungering for some food that should satisfy, and some hope that should comfort.

Perhaps Müller had climbed so high that he looked down on

all denominations as one and the same thing, and classed them together without troubling to search among the mass for any exception. His life had been a stormy one, and priesthood had ever been held up to him as a bugbear and a tyrant ; it had destroyed family peace, and thrust at him on all sides with the sharp sword of malignant persecution, and he at last had trampled it under foot with the scorn and pride of youth, crying aloud : "Of you, and of your God I will have nothing." His passionate love for music and his own splendid gifts had alone saved him from utter heartlessness and hardness, and there was in him a certain nobility of character that made his friendship a gift worth bestowing, and showed that even hostility and injustice had not quite warped his mind.

And it was in this man's path that fate had chosen to throw Sheba Ormatroyd at the most critical period of her life.

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

### SHEBA RECEIVES AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE.

IF Sheba had not been so much absorbed in these new ideas, and so much occupied in thinking out a plan for the book she had made up her mind to write, she might have observed a difference in the way she was treated at home—a certain curiosity and deference in her step-father's manner, and tolerance and friendly complacency in that of her mother ; but she did not notice the change, only she wondered sometimes that Maxime de Pharamond was so constant a visitor. He dined at least three times a week with the Levisons ; but as he generally devoted himself to Bessie Saxton, Sheba put her down as the attraction.

One evening Hex put in an appearance, and Sheba received him with a little trepidation, remembering how irate he had been at the teaching episode. He had altered very much. He was taller now than Sheba herself, and had all the airs and conceits of young manhood, and many of its incipient vices.

He treated his sister with a good-humoured condescension—told her she wasn't half bad-looking, but *dowdy*, and that she was a fool to work when she might live at her ease in luxury. More than this he had been forbidden to say. He remained at home a week, spending half his days in bed reading novels—the other half playing billiards with Pharamond, who had struck up a great friendship with him, or lounging about the Sydney streets with a cigar in his mouth.

I have said before that the Levisons only moved in very second-rate society, despite their wealth, and Mrs. Levison had never yet had the honour of an invitation to Government House. However, this desire of her heart seemed now possible of achievement, owing to Pharamond's interest. She had manœuvred for it very skilfully, so she imagined, and with no idea that the astute Frenchman saw what she was angling for.

One day the longed-for missive arrived, and "Mr. and Mrs. Levison and Miss Ormatroyd" were invited to one of those "omnium gatherum" receptions that were more of a condescension than a compliment.

But Mrs. Levison was perfectly radiant, and when the count dropped in about five o'clock that same afternoon she received him with a welcome almost rapturous.

He thought it was now time to open fire, and without much preamble explained to Mrs. Levison that it was customary in his country to ask the parents of a *demoiselle* for permission to marry her. He told her he was rich, and had large estates in the south of France, so that the question of *dot* was not important, though no doubt the rich Mr. Levison would not let his step-daughter come portionless to her husband. But the truth was, he loved Madlle. Ormatroyd—had loved her from the first—and now asked permission to address her, having explained, as in honour bound, his intentions.

Mrs. Levison grew quite pale with emotion.

"Really," she said, "my dear count, you honour me. Any mother could have but one reply to your generous proposal. I shall be too delighted to receive you here as a suitor for my daughter's hand; but she—I fear she is so young, so indifferent to marriage. You must not be in too great a hurry to speak to her."

The count smiled—a little oddly.

"Perhaps," he said, "you, madame, would speak, and prepare her a little. I know how timid they are, these *ingénues*, but no husband objects to innocence—at first."

"Certainly, I will speak," said Mrs. Levison, colouring a little as she met those bold smiling eyes. "I am sure she will be deeply sensible of the honour you do her. It seems surprising that you should have chosen her for a wife when you must have seen so many beautiful women in London and Paris."

"True," he said; "but the women of society are too alike to please me, in style, as in morals. Now, your daughter—she is fresh, original, clever; she will be beautiful too—ah, that without doubt; and there is about her an air—proud, wild, untamable—a something altogether different from the ordinary *demoiselle*."

"Good heavens!" thought Mrs. Levison; "what can the men see in Sheba? There was Noel Hill, and now Count Pharamond. To me she has always appeared so stupid, and ugly and uninteresting."

Aloud she said, "Ah! you are a lover, count, so one must excuse flattery; but indeed you have made me most happy. My sweet child," she added with emotion; "what a bright future lies before her."

To assert this, Mrs. Levison's nature must have been singularly trustful, considering that she knew nothing at all of Pharamond's antecedents or character. Her husband had made his acquaintance merely through a business transaction, and for the rest they had but his own word. He might have been an adventurer, a criminal—anything; yet she was prepared to fling her innocent young daughter into his arms without a question as to her own feelings on the subject.

One hears a great deal about the beauty and unselfishness of maternity, but observation and experience lead one to think that maternity with marriageable daughters seldom presents a noble or self-denying aspect. The fact of an eligible suitor is invariably hailed with alacrity—eligible, of course, applying to worldly goods and such unimportant details as position, or social dignity. The *moral* character is rarely passed under such microscopic scrutiny as the eligible! Wealth hides a multitude of sins to the eyes of a prospective mother-in-law. Yet the world is full of the cant of the *holiness* of maternity.

There are plenty of women who pose to their offspring as the most martyred and unselfish of beings, simply because the office of maternity has involved a little pain, a little anxiety, and an amount of self-denial that is very often obligatory.

If a woman marries she must undertake the drawbacks of the conjugal state, as well as its triumphs, pleasures or advantages. If children are part and parcel of her new condition, she is only obeying a law of nature, and her doing so has nothing meritorious about it.

When the moral relationship steps in and the duties of child and parent begin to assume a definite shape, then it is time enough to talk of unselfishness; and then, too, we find how few have really stood the crucial test.

When Count Pharamond had bowed himself out that afternoon, Mrs. Levison remained for a long time seated in the drawing-room, taking counsel with herself as to how she would break the news to Sheba. She was a little bit afraid that the girl would not be as elated as she herself felt. True, of late she had been much

more amiable, and indeed had seemed to like Pharamond's society; but then, as Mrs. Levison finished with a sigh, one never *could* count on Sheba—never know what whim or fancy would seize her.

In the midst of her reflections the door opened and her daughter entered. Mrs. Levison looked up.

"Is that you, my dear?" she said, with that needless questioning of what is self-evident, that helps modern conversation so largely.

"Yes," said Sheba, coming into the half-dusk of the big splendid room; "you are alone—what a wonder."

"I have had a visitor," said her mother urbanely; "but he has just left. It was your devoted admirer, Count Pharamond."

"My—devoted admirer?" echoed Sheba, as she flung aside her hat and gloves. "Since when? I thought he was Bessie's."

"You were mistaken, then," said Mrs. Levison with unconcealed triumph, fancying that she had detected an encouraging jealousy in the girl's remark. "It is you whom he admires, and he has done so from the first."

Sheba laughed carelessly. "He does me honour," she said; "I can't say, however, that I appreciate his admiration—or return it."

"Now," thought Mrs. Levison, "there she begins. It is really surprising how that girl manages to aggravate me, even when I am in the best of tempers." She tried to control herself. She felt that this was a case in which diplomacy would count for more than compulsion. She resolved to be diplomatic. "My dear child," she said blandly, "you are the most innocent and unworldly of creatures. I know that, but you are quite old enough to get a little worldly knowledge into your head—clever as it may be. Some day, I suppose you will do as all women do—when they get the chance—marry. Still, it doesn't do for a girl to wait too long, or to be too particular, and really in a country like this I am sure eligible husbands are most difficult to find. Therefore, I must tell you that a great honour has been paid me to-day, and to you, through me. I have, in fact, received an offer of marriage for you from Count de Pharamond."

"Mother!" gasped Sheba, stepping back a pace and turning white as death.

"No doubt you are astonished," persisted Mrs. Levison. "It is really quite incredible what he could have seen in you—a man who might have married into the best society in Europe, and then to choose a little unfashionable colonial. However, there is no accounting for men's tastes. He has done everything quite *en règle*—quite as it is done in the best French society. He came to me and laid his proposals before me, wishing to know whether I approved his suit in the first instance."

"And what did you say?" asked Sheba, recovering from her first astonishment, and feeling now rather amused than otherwise at her mother's complacent manner.

"Say? What could I say? What would any right-feeling Christian mother say who had her child's welfare at heart? I said I was deeply conscious of the honour, and would convey his offer to you."

"And having done that," said Sheba brusquely, "you can tell him when he calls again that I am *not* so conscious of its being an honour, and have certainly neither inclination nor intention of accepting it."

Mrs. Levison kept silence for a moment. She was bitterly enraged, but for once she felt it would be a losing game if she gave way to violence. Sheba was obstinate and self-willed, but she could be easily guided by kindness. She sank back in her chair and gave a little sob. The girl sprang forward instantly and threw herself on her knees beside her. "Mother," she cried, "what is it—what is the matter? Don't cry; oh, please don't cry."

But Mrs. Levison's sobs redoubled. "Oh, Sheba, Sheba," she wailed, "how you always distress me; you are my only daughter and I'm sure I love you, and wish to make you happy, but it always seems as if you delighted in doing the very reverse of what I wish. Such a chance—such a splendid offer! Why, you would mix with crowned heads, go into the world, become a celebrated and beautiful woman—and just for a whim, a child's fancy, you want to throw it all away. You will break my heart, you really will."

"Dear mother," said the girl earnestly, "if you love me as you say, you would not want me to be miserable, and I should be that if I married Count Pharamond. I don't like him; I never did; he is bold, coarse, and I am sure, cruel. Besides, I don't want to marry, and as it is myself I am to give away, surely I ought to have some voice in the matter."

"Such an offer—such a position," still lamented Mrs. Levison between her sobs.

"But if I don't care for them how do they concern *you*?" asked the straightforward Sheba. "I should be in another country—probably you would never see my splendour, or my position. It could not be any great satisfaction, I should think, only to *speak* of them. That is what it amounts to, and for my own part I would not accept Count Pharamond as a husband, even if he had a throne to offer me instead of a title. I don't care for him—"

"Do not talk so foolishly," exclaimed her mother, dropping her handkerchief at last, and her sobs with it. "It is enough to exasperate a saint to hear you. Such a chance will never occur again. I

am sure of that, and as years go on you will always regret not taking my advice now. Bessie Saxton would not need to be asked twice."

"No," said Sheba quietly; "once would be enough, but then - I am not quite like Bessie Saxton."

"I wish to Heaven you were!" cried Mrs. Levison with pardonable energy. "She is admirable in every sense of the word. I am so fond of her that I have asked her to stay on here when the others leave Sdney. You are no companion to me—none whatever—and my drives are so lonely, and as for dresses, why, you never even *seem* to see whether I have a new gown on or not."

"I thought," said the girl gravely, "that Dolly more than made up for my blindness."

"Dolly!" cried Mrs. Levison, "a spoilt pert minx." Then with another burst of emotion she went on, "It is hard to have only one daughter and to see her turning out as you are doing. What do you expect will become of you? You have no fortune—you are no beauty—and if you live the drudging life of a governess you will soon lose your one marketable possession—youth. A nice future then awaits you."

"Perhaps," said Sheba, "I have another marketable possession, as you kindly put it—*brains*; they may enable me to live, even without beauty or fortune."

"Oh, no doubt," sneered Mrs. Levison; "you think yourself very clever, but there is such a thing as being too self-satisfied. I tell you again that if you refuse this offer you will repent it as long as you live. Mr. Levison will be furious, and I—I really think disappointment and sorrow will make an old woman of me."

"I am very sorry," said Sheba rising to her feet. "Perhaps the count would wait for—Dolly. It is only a question of nine or ten years, and he admires youth."

"Don't be an idiot," cried Mrs. Levison, losing her temper at last, as she invariably did in all their arguments, however much she might have determined to keep it. "Now listen to me. I will give you a week to reflect; by that time I hope you will have seen the folly of throwing away such a chance. The count perfectly adores you, and I am sure you have given him every encouragement. It would be perfectly shameful now to throw him over. The act of a heartless coquette."

"Coquette!" cried Sheba, her face growing scarlet. "That is not true, mother. I have never encouraged him. You asked him to the house; you made him take me in to dinner; you threw us together as much as you possibly could, but I—I did nothing; I rather avoided him, as you know. I am not to blame if he credits me with your good intentions."

"Very well, Sheba," said her mother, drawing herself up and growing very white. "You have said enough. Things have come to a crisis between us, and I mean to decide once for all. I will *not* let you openly defy me under my own roof. I have been too indulgent hitherto, and *this* is the result—direct disobedience. Well, it shall be put a stop to now—at once. You do not go out of this house without my permission. You do not give another lesson to this German's child, or leave my roof under any pretence whatever. As long as you are under age you are under your parents' authority, and I mean to enforce that authority—you hear me?"

"Yes," said Sheba very quietly. "I hear you."

"Then remember I am in earnest," said Mrs. Levison; "I will have no more of your obstinacy and self-will. I have been a great fool to put up with them so long. But I shall not do so for another day—another hour. Now go to your room and reflect on what I have said."

Sheba moved coldly and silently away. At the door she paused, and holding the handle in her hand, she looked back to where that passionate angry figure stood in the centre of the large room.

"Will you tell me one thing," she said in a restrained voice—a voice so unlike her own that her mother scarcely recognized it; "when—am I of age?"

"When you are twenty-one," said Mrs. Levison; "nearly three years hence."

"Three years," echoed the girl. "Well, mother, hear me now in my turn. For those three years I will do your bidding in all things save—marriage. But the very day the last year expires, I will leave your roof and go out into the world and earn my own living—though I have to work like a galley-slave to do it!"

"Oh no, you won't," said Mrs. Levison, with a cold slighting laugh. "I know what all that bombastic talk is worth. Long before the three years are up, my dear, you will be glad to marry any one—even Count Pharamond."

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

BESSIE SAXTON HAS SUSPICIONS.

"Oh, you silly! silly! silly," cried Dolly, dancing to and fro before Sheba, as she sat in her own room that evening. "Oh, you great big goose of geese! Only to think of it—such a chance,



such a splendid, glorious, magnificent chance! Oh! if I were only seventeen. If I were sixteen even, I would marry that count myself."

"Would to Heaven you could," said Sheba lifting her pale face and heavy eyes to the little restless figure before her. "You have about as much heart as he has."

"Heart!" scoffed Dolly. "Phooh! What does that matter—in marrying? Papa says money is everything. Here you would have money and position—both. Why, he has great castles—*châteaux* he calls them, in France—and horses and carriages and goes to court: he has told me all that and so has mamma, and to think you won't marry him. Oh, you silly donkey of a Sheba!"

"I suppose I *am* an idiot according to your interpretation and mother's," said Sheba coldly. "You will make up for my deficiencies, however. There will be no difficulty in marrying *you* to any satyr or *roué* in the shape of a man, provided only he has the wherewithal to satisfy your extravagance."

"I don't know what you mean by satyr—or the French word," said Dolly. "Was it French—it sounded like it? But I am sure Count Pharamond is a very nice man—much nicer than most of the men who come here."

"Oh," laughed Sheba, scornfully, "if it comes to contrasts——"

"Well," said Dolly, "as you look down on the Jewish men, why don't you marry a Christian? Is he a Christian—or a Roman Catholic though?"

Sheba laughed outright.

"It is time some one looked after your education," she said; then the word "education" brought back the memory of her mother's mandate respecting her own little pupil, and her brow clouded again and she wondered what she could possibly say to Paul Meredith for breaking her engagement in this abrupt fashion.

"I couldn't believe it when mamma told me," went on the little chatterer. "That he should want to marry you was wonderful enough—but that you should say *no*—*no*! You surely don't mean it, Sheba?"

"Yes," said the girl frowning, "I do, and I don't wish to discuss the subject with you or any one. Now go away from my room. I have to write a letter."

"It is more than stupid, it is shameful," persisted Dolly, moving reluctantly away. "I could have been your bridesmaid—one of them—of course you would have had six at least, and we could have worn white lace over blue satin. Blue and white are my colours, you know, and then the cake, and the favours, and all

the fun of a real wedding, and how jealous the Moss's would have been—and to think it's all spoilt just because you've said 'No.' It is downright cruel of you!"

"No doubt," said Sheba with exasperation. "Marriage of course entails nothing but just the ceremony, and the fuss and finery of the day; nothing more—no after life together!"

"Well—children—generally," said Dolly with a cunning little smile. "But you needn't think about them—just at first."

"Dolly," cried Sheba growing scarlet. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Whatever will your precocity end in?"

"Oh, a husband and an establishment of course," said the child grinning maliciously. "I've heard about nothing else since I was three years old. I shall be quite an heiress, you know, I shall be able to pick and choose—you can't afford to do that—your own mother says so. That's why every one will think you such a fool—even your friend Bessie Saxton. Take care she doesn't catch him. She would give her ears to do it, I know."

"Are you going?" asked Sheba wearily, as she sat down again on her chair and leaned her head on her hand.

"You are always in a hurry to get rid of me," said the child. "And I'm sure I'm the only one in the house who cares for you at all. Oh, Sheba, *do, do* think over the count's offer. You will no longer be snubbed and badly treated; you will be as grand a lady as the Governor General's wife—you could have diamonds as big as peas—much bigger than Mrs. Moss's. I know hers are only second-hand; her husband got them from a client who had borrowed money at 50 per cent., I heard that from Sara Moss herself. Oh! if I were only in your shoes, I'd dance for joy at the idea of such a chance. Mamma and papa can talk of nothing else. Do you know Bessie Saxton is coming to-morrow—to stay? Whatever will she say when she hears this?"

Sheba groaned in despair. It seemed as if nothing but main force would get rid of the irrepressible Dolly to-night.

"You don't seem at all happy as you are," she persisted, "so why don't you try another sort of life? You are not bad-looking now—but it won't last, and then you'll find yourself an old maid."

Sheba rose and seized the child by the arm. "Dolly," she said sternly, "you have said enough; now go. You don't understand my reasons, and I am not going to explain them. Leave the room at once."

Sulky and abashed the child obeyed, and Sheba at last left to herself sat down to pen a few lines to Meredith in explanation of her broken engagement. The hot tears filled her eyes as she wrote. Her life would seem so hard and dreary now without

occupation and without congenial companionship. And Müller, the kind-hearted old German, what would he think of her changed resolves? Still her mother had spoken so firmly and definitely that the girl did not dream of disobeying her. Never did she remember being spoken to in such a manner since her early childhood, and she saw clearly enough that Mrs. Levison meant what she said.

A great chill and fear seemed to touch her heart as she thought of what such tyranny would mean now. Isolation—silence—pain. The absence of a face she had grown to watch and long for as the day's one delight. The chance meeting of eyes, eloquent in their very silence. But she wrote her letter all the same, and it was all the colder and more formal because of the pain that shadowed every word; she wrote it and rang for a servant to post it, and then when it had actually gone, sat on there in her quiet little chamber, wondering what fresh ills Fate had in store for her.

Meanwhile the story of her folly and obstinacy was being related to her step-father. It did not tend to increase his lukewarm affection for the girl, but it made him very furious with what he called her d——d high-flown airs. He even went so far as to declare that if she persisted in refusing Pharamond's offer he would turn her out of his house, but his wife reminded him that in all probability that would just suit the refractory girl. "She is always talking about independence," added her mother. "The best way to break her spirit is to keep her here in complete subjection, and not allow her to do anything she wishes."

"By Jove!" said Mr. Levison suddenly, "I believe you're right. No doubt those new friends would encourage her in obstinacy. Very well—give her a taste of solitary confinement; perhaps that will take the nonsense out of her. Ah!" and he turned proudly to Dolly, who was stuffing herself with raisins and *bonbons* from his plate, "what a pity you didn't bring her up as I have brought *my* daughter. No fear of her turning up her nose at a good offer for some romantic nonsense about love—eh, Dolly, my pet?"

"I should think not, papa," said Dolly. "I suppose," she added reflectively, "the count wouldn't wait for *me*? You might ask him."

Mr. Levison burst into such explosive mirth over the cleverness of this remark, that his wife had left the table before he recovered either gravity, or breath.

She betook herself to her own room, and thought and thought till her head ached, of what she could do to make Sheba retract her refusal to marry Count Pharamond.

"She must and *shall* accept," she repeated with angry resolution. "I couldn't have the face to say 'No' to a titled personage—and she will be perfectly unbearable living on here for the next three years. Oh! why hadn't I a daughter like Bessie Saxton?"

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The next day Bessie Saxton herself arrived for that visit upon which she had determined, and for which she had almost asked. When she heard the news she was as furious as Mrs. Levison, but for a very different reason.

She felt she had been duped and tricked by this man, and as she remembered some of his words and hints, the blood rushed in a hot tide of wrath and humiliation to her face.

Being as unreasonable as a jealous woman proverbially is, she blamed Sheba in an equal degree, and though she pretended to ally herself with Mrs. Levison, she secretly determined that the girl should never have the opportunity of changing her mind.

"There *must* be some one else," she thought. "I am sure of it, otherwise she would have jumped at such a chance. I shall find out before long, and then——"

Without finishing the reflection she went to Sheba.

The girl was sitting at a small table covered with books and papers. She sprang to her feet with a cry of delight when she saw Bessie enter.

"You have come, then?" she said. "Oh, I am so glad. I suppose you know I am in disgrace as usual?"

"You are very unlucky," said Bessie, kissing her somewhat coldly. "What is this new folly I hear of?"

"They all want me to marry that odious Count Pharamond," said Sheba passionately, "and I won't—nothing will induce me to accept him."

"Let us talk it over," said Bessie composedly. "I don't see why you should call him odious. He is the only gentleman—barring Noel Hill—that I have ever met at your house; and certainly he is a very good match."

"Oh!" cried Sheba impatiently, "when shall I hear the last of his being a good match? As if I cared for *that!*"

"Do you care for any one else?" asked Bessie, looking at her searchingly.

Sheba flushed scarlet, then grew as suddenly pale.

"Care?" she said. "I—no—of course not. I have never even thought of such a thing."

"Oh," said her friend coolly, "love doesn't always wait to be

—thought of—before paying us a visit. Perhaps Noel Hill has found favour in your eyes."

Sheba laughed outright. "Noel Hill? He is just like a brother. I have never thought of him in any other way."

"Well," said Bessie, "the question is, what's to be done? Your mother and Mr. Levison are simply furious. They mean to *make* you accept this man if it is possible."

"It will never be possible," said Sheba calmly, "*never*. They may kill me if they like. I really often think I wouldn't mind if they did. I have always been unhappy—always—and no one cares for me here. They would be very glad if I was dead——"

"Oh, don't talk of anything so horrible," said Bessie with a little shiver. "Death indeed! Why, you hardly know what life is yet. But what are you going to do? Of course they can't force you to marry this man, but they can make life very unpleasant for you if you don't."

"I know that," said Sheba mournfully. "Mother has forbidden me to teach little Paul Meredith any longer, and I have had to write and explain that to his father. It is very cruel. It was the only pleasure I had."

"An odd sort of pleasure, I should fancy," said Bessie. "But then you always were such an extraordinary girl."

Then a sudden thought crossed her mind. "Perhaps it was the father who was the attraction. He is handsome enough certainly, and just the type of man to attract a romantic girl like Sheba. She is such a fool—she couldn't keep a secret from me. . . . I must find out."

But for the present she only plied her with skilful hints and pretended sympathy, and Sheba even confided to her the resolve she had made to write, and in discussing that engrossing subject she had almost forgotten her new trouble, when a sharp knock came at the door, and a servant entered with a card:

"Mr. Paul Meredith, if you please, to see Miss Ormatroyd."

Sheba started to her feet, her face growing as white as her dress. "Oh, Bessie," she gasped, "what am I to do? What can I say?"

Bessie looked at her white face and great startled eyes. "I do believe——" she said to herself. Then she laughed aloud. "Don't be so terrified," she said; "go and tell him the facts as they stand. Your mother wants you to marry this French count, and because you won't, she refuses to let you do anything you yourself wish."

"Shall I tell him—that?" faltered Sheba, growing red and pale with emotion. "Won't he think it very odd?"

"Not in the least, I imagine," said her friend dryly. "And you know you have a predilection for speaking the truth."

Sheba moved toward the door in a shy, absorbed fashion, and Bessie's cold blue eyes studied her intently.

"I am sure I am right," she said to herself. "She will tell him exactly how matters are, and then—well, then I suppose there will be a crisis!"

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## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### A CRISIS.

WITH trembling fingers Sheba turned the handle of the drawing-room door and found herself in the presence of Paul Meredith. He came towards her quickly and held out his hand.

"Miss Ormatroyd," he said, "what is the meaning of all this? Your note was such a surprise to me; I felt I must have an explanation. They told me your mother was out, so I asked for you. I—I really could not understand what you meant by saying you could not come any more to my house. It is as if—as if—you had not been treated with proper respect, or consideration there."

"Oh, no, no," cried Sheba impetuously. "Pray do not think that. I must have expressed myself very badly, but I was so distressed—so unhappy——"

He saw she was trembling violently, and still holding her hand he led her to a chair. "Look upon me as a friend," he said, "and tell me all that has happened. Am I to blame?"

"No," cried Sheba, flushing hotly, "it is not you; it is—myself. They never wished me to teach—still my mother did not absolutely forbid it—but now——"

"Yes?" he said inquiringly as she paused.

She lifted her great sorrowful eyes to his, and that look went to his heart, it was so pathetic and so patient.

"I don't know if I ought to tell you," she stammered, her colour changing with every word. "They wish me to—marry."

"Marry!" he started as he echoed the word, and looked at her again with soft and troubled eyes.

"Marry," Sheba continued, "some one I don't like—and because I refused they have forbidden me to do anything that will take me away from home; that is all. I did not like to tell you when I wrote."

"I should think not," he said, his face growing dark with

anger. "What an infamous thing! And who is the individual whose suit is so favoured?"

"A French count who visits here. The Count de Pharamond," said Sheba, colouring shyly.

"Good heavens!" he cried passionately. "That blackguard!"

Sheba looked up in surprise. "Is he a bad man?" she asked simply. "I felt it—but I could not say why."

"Yes," answered Meredith curtly. "He is bad—thoroughly bad—but report says he is enormously rich. I suppose that gilds even his sins in the eyes of your parents. Have you known him long?"

"No," cried Sheba; "only a few weeks——"

"And have you refused—decidedly refused to marry him?" asked Meredith.

"Yes," she said quickly. "But he spoke to my mother, not to me, and I don't think she has told him that I said—no."

"But," he said, "it seems very preposterous that for this reason you are not to fulfil your engagement. I left Paul crying his eyes out. Nothing would satisfy him but that I should come here and speak to you myself. It is very unfortunate," he added, "for I am leaving Sydney soon and I felt so happy in thinking you would be with him, and prevent his missing me. Perhaps if I were to speak to your mother——"

"I am afraid," Sheba said sorrowfully, "it would be no use. I did not know that I had no right to make any engagement without their sanction. They seemed glad enough to get rid of me just at that time."

He walked up and down the long room—his brows knit—his face dark with anger. "You are not happy—here?" he said abruptly.

"No," she said, the tears gathering in her eyes. "Most unhappy."

"I thought so—I felt it," he went on, speaking stormily and yet with deep feeling. "I never said much to you, but I could read your face and I knew your life, young as it was, had known troubles; so has mine, as I told you when we met again. Perhaps I should not speak, perhaps I am saying too much, but if it lay in my power—if I could make you happy——"

"You," she cried—and startled and confused and vaguely glad she sprang to her feet, and gazed at his troubled face and kindling eyes.

"I"—he said very low, "I never thought to say it again to living woman. I set myself against you—I avoided you as you know—but—well, fate is too strong for me I suppose—I love you,

Sheba. Will you trust me? Will you share my wandering life and end all this unhappiness and tyranny? I think I could make you happy . . . if you would let me."

Sheba had listened like one in a dream. It seemed as if she was in a dream—standing there in the big shadowy room with its closed shutters and faintly perfumed air—standing there and hearing such words from this her hero—the one man, who all unknown to herself, had peopled her fancies and lived in her memory since the first hour his eyes had met her own.

Her heart throbbed so fiercely it nearly suffocated her. The light and the shadows seemed to swim hazily before her sight.

"You cannot mean it," she cried faintly. "It is out of pity you speak. I—I should not have told you about this—"

She sank down in her chair and hid her face in her hands. A stifled sob escaped her. It seemed as if the last drop had filled her cup of shame and perplexity.

He came near, and stooping touched her hands with his lips. "Do not weep," he said; "I would not pain you for all the world. Is it so hard to believe I love you? If a man like Count Pharamond has been subjugated, that might teach you your power."

Her hands were drawn into his—her eyes, still humid with tears, looked back at his own. She seemed to realize at last that he spoke truly, and her whole nature yielded to the passionate and enthralling force of awakened feeling.

"Oh," she cried brokenly, "I am not worthy of your love; you are so great, so famous—and I——"

"Indeed, I am but a graceless singer," he said, and drew her gently to his heart, and touched almost with reverence the trembling mobile lips, "but you will be to me inspiration—glory—life."

"I—oh no," she murmured, trembling greatly at the strangeness of that first embrace, which made her heart throb like a bird in the hand of its captor.

"If—you love me," he said, "and I think you do——"

"Yes," she said simply. "I did not know—I hardly dared to think—but I know now."

"That is well," he said, drawing a long deep breath. "And after confessing it you need not worry yourself any more; I will fight your battles for you——"

He raised her head, and looked long and earnestly into those great, deep wonderful eyes. What wells of truth and tenderness and purity they were.

As they thus stood oblivious to all else, tranced in that half embrace, the door opened and Mrs. Levison swept in.

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As a matter of history, it has not yet been recorded that the sight of one's daughter enacting on her own responsibility the rôle of the female character in that celebrated picture of "The Huguenot," has ever been greeted with special cordiality.

Mrs. Levison was not destined to prove an exception to the rule; perhaps, however, she found—as other mothers before and after her time have found—that the other character in the affecting tableau was just the very last person she would have desired to see in it.

Bristling and irate, she darted a vengeful glance at Meredith and then at Sheba, and said icily:

"Pray may I ask who is this—gentleman?"

Feeling he was in a false position, Paul stammered feebly that he had called to inquire Miss Ormatroyd's reason for breaking her engagement. "For the rest," he added, gaining courage at sight of Sheba's terror, "I am quite ready to give you an explanation of . . . of what must seem a little—extraordinary——"

"Extraordinary!" cried Mrs. Levison, her face growing red and furious at the coolness and audacity of this stranger; "I should think it was—extraordinary."

"Perhaps," he said, "when I tell you that I love your daughter, and that she does me the honour to return that love, you will allow that——"

"Allow! Love! What preposterous nonsense! I—I don't understand how you dare speak of such things—you, a total stranger."

"Pardon me. I am not a stranger to your daughter, and I am endeavouring to explain——"

"I don't want any explanations," interrupted Mrs. Levison passionately, "and I have nothing to say to you on such a subject except that I have other views for my daughter. Even if I had not, I should not listen to a person who takes advantage of a girl's unprotected position to make clandestine love to her, unknown to her rightful guardians."

"Mother!" cried Sheba, her eyes flashing indignantly, "do not accuse Mr. Meredith of dishonourable conduct. He never spoke one word to me that all the world might not have heard, and I never even guessed that he did me the honour of caring for me, till a few moments ago."

"Honour!" sneered Mrs. Levison furiously. "Fine honour! But I am not here to discuss the matter. Leave the room instantly, Sheba—instantly," stamping her foot as the girl gave no sign of attention. "As for this presumptuous individual, I

will send Mr. Levison to him with an answer. I have given my opinion; and, now, sir, I must ask you to leave the house."

She waved her arm towards the door, but Meredith only advanced to Sheba and took both her hands in his.

"One moment, madam," he said proudly. "You have insulted me most grossly, but for that I care little. I must tell you, however, that I consider my love for your daughter and hers for me gives me a right to protect her from the unkindness and tyranny she experiences at home. Whenever she chooses to leave that home and seek my protection, I shall be ready to receive her. I will make her my wife to-morrow if she will only say the word."

"She will not dare to say the word, as you call it," cried Mrs. Levison, trembling now with passion and baffled ambition. "Bad and bold as her conduct is, I yet trust she has not *quite* forgotten the duty and obedience she owes *me*. As long as she is under age she shall remain under my roof, and she cannot marry without my consent."

Paul Meredith smiled. "I think," he said, "you are speaking somewhat foolishly. She is over sixteen, and quite of an age to marry with, or without your consent. I am sorry to have to speak so plainly, but you have brought it on yourself, and I fail to see why you should insult me, without waiting to hear who, or what I am. If I gave up my profession to-morrow and went back to England, I should be entitled to a position equal to that of this not very reputable French count whose suit you favour."

"If you were a prince of the blood it would make no difference to my determination," said Mrs. Levison loftily. "I consider you have behaved as no gentleman would ever have done, and, as I said before, I have other views for my daughter."

He bowed coldly and looked once more at the trembling, white-faced girl by his side.

"Courage, my dearest," he said softly. "Remember I shall be true to you, come what may; and now, as it seems useless to prolong this unpleasant interview, I will say good-evening."

He took up his hat, gave one long pressure to Sheba's hand, bowed ceremoniously to her mother, and left the room.

As the door closed Mrs. Levison turned on Sheba like a tigress. She was in far too great a passion to weigh her speech, or care what terms of wrath and opprobrium she showered on the girl.

Her coarse, cruel words tore off every illusion that had sheltered and made beautiful this idyl of her love. She heard her conduct described as immodest, indelicate, hypocritical, false,

vile, treacherous, every epithet indeed that passion and injustice could frame into utterance.

Many as had been the painful scenes between her mother and herself, there had never been a scene like this. For Sheba was determined to be true to her own heart, and her mother was equally determined she should not. Like most tyrannical people, Mrs. Levison could not stand opposition. It made her cruel, vindictive and irrational. She stormed and raved, and grew more and more wrathful every moment, while Sheba only stood there mute and still, but with that resolute look on her white face that her mother knew of old, and which made her inwardly ashamed of her undignified anger, and vaguely conscious that it was as the sea's futile waves dashing against the immovability of a rock.

"Now listen—once for all," she said when she had fairly exhausted her vocabulary of abuse. "I have made up my mind that you *shall* marry Pharamond, and no one else, so the sooner you give up this romantic nonsense the better. Go to your room, and don't leave it until you are prepared to obey my wishes. If you come to your senses I will perhaps endeavour to forgive your undutiful conduct. For the present I would rather not see your face at all. I am ashamed even to think a daughter of mine, brought up as you have been brought up, should be guilty of such a low, miserable intrigue as this that I have discovered. I shall have poor little Dolly contaminated next."

The bathos of that conclusion made Sheba laugh, despite her distress and perplexity.

"You had better keep her from me, then," she said as she prepared to leave the room. "And if your forgiveness depends on my marrying Pharamond, I am afraid it will be a long time before it is required."

"I say you *shall* marry him," said Mrs. Levison fiercely, stamping her foot as she spoke.

"And I," said Sheba resolutely and quietly, "say I shall *not*. Nothing will induce me to do so—nothing!"

Mrs. Levison's face grew ashy and haggard. She was far more bent on this match now than she had been before, partly because she hated to find herself worsted in any combat, and partly because she really considered that a marriage with an opera singer, "a puppet of the stage," as she termed Meredith, would be an everlasting disgrace. She was terribly obstinate and prejudiced in some things, and no amount of argument could convince her that a *gentleman* could ever make music, or acting his profession, when there were honourable, lucrative posts, such as clerkships in

merchants' offices and banks, to be had almost for the asking. Delighted as she would have been to see Sheba married, she yet had not the slightest intention of allowing her to marry any one like Meredith, and with the proposal of Count Pharamond still ringing in her ears, she could not even *think* calmly of her daughter's audacious suitor.

She threw herself, exhausted and weakly crying, on a couch as the door closed on Sheba. How she pitied herself for the misfortune of possessing such a daughter. Why could she not be as other girls, even as Bessie Saxton?

Just then the door opened again, and Bessie put her head in.

"Gracious!" she cried. "What *has* happened? Sheba passed me just now like a tornado, and has locked herself into her room, and now you—my dear Mrs. Levison, pray tell me what *is* the matter?"

And between her sobs and bursts of rage Mrs. Levison told her. Bessie listened quite silently, but her eyes sparkled with malice and her heart beat high with triumph.

When Mrs. Levison ceased and withdrew her handkerchief, she gazed appealingly at the girl's impassive face. "Oh, my dear," she moaned, "can't you help me? Is there nothing you could advise?"

For a moment Bessie was silent. Then she said in a low, hard voice, "If you are resolved on this marriage, there is but one thing to do—desperate cases, desperate remedies, you know. I—I hardly like to suggest anything. I know how obstinate Sheba is. Arguments and persuasions are simply wasted on her."

"You are right," groaned Mrs. Levison. "Ah, if Providence had only blessed me with a daughter like you! But what is the suggestion, my dear? I would do anything—*anything* to prevent her marrying this singer."

"Well," said Bessie, a little nervously and lowering her voice, "it is simply this: you must get Pharamond to—compromise—her in some way. Then she will be *obliged* to marry him."

Mrs. Levison stared at her. "What do you mean?" she asked, somewhat startled at the boldness of the suggestion.

"It is the only thing to do," said the girl hurriedly, "and it is easily managed. I have read about it in French novels, and a hint would be enough for Pharamond. I could manage it if you wish. Of course only for *your* sake. I can't bear to see you so unhappy."

"And how is it to be done?" asked Mrs. Levison curiously.

"Simply enough. Give one of your large dinner-parties, and arrange that the count shall stay a few days here. That is all."

"But," stammered Mrs. Levison, "my husband will think it odd. We have never asked him to stay before . . . and—he might refuse."

The girl rose and shrugged her handsome shoulders with a gesture of indifference.

"He will not refuse," she said, and a faint colour stained her clear pale skin. "And I thought you asked my advice."

"Yes," said Mrs. Levison almost humbly, "I did—but——"

"If you can suggest anything else, do so," said Bessie coldly. "I know Sheba better than you do. She will never marry this man unless—circumstances force her to do so."

"And you think," said Mrs. Levison, "that you can arrange the—circumstances? I should not like any scandal, you know."

"There will be none," said Bessie, with an odd hard smile. "I have read my little plot in a French novel. It is as simple as it is effectual. You can trust me, Mrs. Levison."

"Ah!" sighed that lady with her ever recurring regret, "so clever—so pretty. If *only* you had been my daughter instead of Sheba!"

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT.

"*Gott im Himmel!*" cried old Müller, staring aghast at an agitated figure pacing to and fro their quiet sitting-room. "What say you? Marry her—marry Sheba Ormatroyd! You, the woman-hater—the anchorite! *Was ist denn mit ihr?*"

"What can I do?" said Meredith, dragging a chair up to the table, and gazing moodily at his friend's face. "I love the girl—more than words can say. I have avoided her, as you know, because . . . because I feared my strength . . . It was no use—she is wretched. Her life will be ruined if she stays with those people—and the mother . . . Heavens! if you had heard her—and they seem determined to force her into the arms of this French libertine. I know enough of him. As I told you, he is behind the scenes nearly every night—and I know for a fact he has ruined that pretty little Coralie Grey, the dancer. Faugh—it is sacrilege to think of Sheba even in his presence."

"And so," said Müller gravely, "you—love—each other. I am surprised, and yet I always thought the girl looked upon you as a sort of hero. She is very romantic, you know—but she is so young. Are you sure, *lieber Freund*, that you can trust her? Remember your first lesson."

"I do," said the young man growing very pale and with a hardening of the lips that made his face look strangely stern. "I remembered it so long that I have scarcely even spoken to Sheba Ormatroyd when she has been here. It was hard enough, sometimes. Those beautiful eloquent eyes used to gaze at me so innocently and beseechingly."

"But," said Müller, lighting his big pipe as was his wont in any case of discussion, "there are complications—you remember you told me your story. Is it safe, think you, to marry without proof that you are free?"

"I have the best proof—*his word*," answered Meredith moodily. "Besides, she deserted me. She has no longer a claim."

"True," said the old German. "But if Sheba knew—would she marry you? that is the question. Women are so odd, you know, such sticklers for ceremony. And if anything should chance hereafter——"

"How could it? What nonsense you talk," exclaimed the young man impatiently. "Even if—she—were not dead as that ruffian swore, she has no legal right or claim on me, and I am not the sort of man to play the deceiver. I love Sheba Ormatroyd as I never thought to love living woman, and I would be true to her with or without legal compulsion—that I swear."

"Oh," said Müller indifferently, "as for forms and ceremonies, you know what I think of them! No man ought to marry if he cannot of himself be true to the woman he loves. Feeling *that* is absolutely certain, he needs not the mummerly of a priest's words to make the union holy. But that is all very well, only would Sheba think so?"

"We can be married by a registrar," said Meredith. "There is no need for the religious ceremony at all, and no likelihood of it," he added bitterly, "for it will certainly be a case of running off with her. That mother of hers will never consent. You ought to have heard her abuse me and my position, Müller; it would have done your heart good; she looks upon music as a disgrace, it appears, and I am a sort of licensed mountebank, dressed up to sing and act at so much a night. There is a new view of your adored art for you!"

"Phooh!" said the old man contemptuously, "does the prating of fools make any difference to the laws of existence? Why waste breath in combating the ignorance of a small section of humanity? You ought to know better than to care for such pin-pricks."

"It is not that I—care," said Meredith; "I am too proud and too fond of my art to heed what such people as these Levisons

say ; only it surprised me somewhat to see one light in which it is viewed."

Then he rose and began his pacing of the room. "What is to be done?" he said again. "In a week I go to Queensland."

"Take her with you," said Müller, puffing huge clouds up to the ceiling.

"Easier said than done," answered Meredith gloomily.

The old man laughed. "Nay, *mein Lieber*, have you played Romeo on the stage and know not how to act it in reality?" he said. "Has not Cupid laughed at parents and guardians, and locks and bolts, from time immemorial? Tell her she must decide—I make little doubt she will—and in your favour. For the rest I can play the protecting father till you are able to marry her ; she will be quite safe."

"Safe!" cried Meredith hotly. "I should think so. Do you fancy I am a blackguard like Pharamond?"

"Softly, softly," said Müller, with his little smile. "I know what it is to be young and hot-blooded, and how sometimes the very best intentions are frustrated by—nature. Then there is the law to be considered, you know. Is she of legal age to contract a marriage without consent of parents—eh? If not, will there be hue and cry and pursuit after Signor Paoletti? It won't do, you know, to ruin your professional prospects for sake of a love affair."

"There will be no fear of *that*," said Meredith. "From what I could judge of her mother's feelings she won't trouble her head about the girl once she takes the law into her own hands. The question is—how am I to communicate with her?"

"Write, of course," said Müller.

"I fear she will not be allowed to receive letters."

"Is there no friend within the citadel?" inquired the old man. "Hard if there is not."

"I cannot tell," said Paul gloomily. "I never entered the house till to-day, and," he added fervently, "I never wish to do so again."

At this moment there came a loud ring at the bell. Müller looked up. "The post," he said. "If it should be——"

They both turned eagerly to the door, and a moment later the servant entered with a letter. Paul seized it; his brow clouded. "No," he said, "it is not her writing." He opened the envelope with languid and indifferent fingers, and glanced carelessly at its contents. Suddenly his face grew eager. "Good heavens!" he said. "Müller, listen to this :

“DEAR SIR,

“I have heard from my friend Miss Ormatroyd of the difficult position in which you are both placed. I am her great—in fact, her only—friend, and it is needless to say how deeply I feel for her. As you may suppose, Mrs. Levison has forbidden her to write to you; but I feel justified in setting at defiance so arbitrary a command. If, therefore, you wish to communicate with her you are quite at liberty to do so *through me*, for I am fortunately staying with the Levisons on a visit, and shall be only too happy to assist my poor friend, who is in a heartbroken and almost desperate state. She is to be kept a close prisoner in her own room until she agrees to accept this other suitor, of whom you have heard. It remains for you therefore to come to the rescue, if possible. At all events, let me assure you that you at least have a friend and assistant in

“Your humble servant,  
“BESSIE SAXTON.”

“What a curious letter,” said Müller. “It sounds to me like a trap. Do you know this girl?”

“No,” said Meredith, gazing with evident perturbation at the large, bold handwriting; “but I have heard Sheba speak of her, and it opens up a possibility of communication, you see. What do you suspect?”

Müller took the letter and examined it carefully. “I should say she was not quite—true,” he said thoughtfully; “but then you know I never believe in women’s friendships, still less do I believe they are ready to assist one another in a love affair, unless there is some hidden motive. However, that we cannot discover yet. You had better write to Sheba under cover of this very friendly young lady. Be cautious what you say, for the letter may fall into other hands. If she receives it safely, time enough to fix your plans.”

“I think,” said Meredith gravely, “I will give the parents one more chance. I will write to her step-father, and formally ask his consent. If he refuses——”

“Which he is sure to do,” said Müller. “I suspect he is a led-by-the-nose husband, with a virago of a wife.”

“Well,” laughed Meredith, “let me give him the chance of proving his mastership. Of course if he says no also, I must ask Sheba to decide for herself.”

“And if I know her at all she is just the girl to do so,” said Müller, “and,” he added softly, “just the girl to make you happy, my poor Paul. She has a grand nature, and God knows



your life has been a hard and cold one long enough. It is time you had the comfort of a woman's love, and Sheba, ah, how she *will* love! That great, ardent, repressed soul! What treasures lie there. Happy Paul! For the first time in my grim, book-wormish, selfish life I envy youth, and hope, and passion." He laid down his pipe as he spoke, and with a short nod of farewell, went off to his own room.

Paul saw him no more that night.

\*     \*     \*     \*     \*

The formal proposal to Mr. Levison was answered by the return of Meredith's own letter without any comment. It was such an insult that even the placid, easy-going old German was roused to fierce anger. As for Paul himself, he now felt at liberty to act independently of Sheba's relatives altogether, and soon a regular communication was established between them by means of Bessie Saxton.

Time was hastening on. The company had to start almost immediately for Queensland, and Mrs. Levison, knowing this, redoubled her vigilance over Sheba. Once the hateful opera people were gone, she felt she could breathe freely, and in the meantime, being utterly unsuspecting of Bessie Saxton's double-dealing, she communicated everything to that young lady.

A dinner-party was fixed for the very night that the obnoxious suitor was to start, and Mrs. Levison found she had no difficulty in persuading Count Pharamond to stay a couple of days at Oaklands.

She had informed him that Sheba would give him a definite reply on that occasion, and he had professed his entire willingness to wait until then.

"You see, count," said Mrs. Levison, "my daughter is very young and timid, and she has not as yet given any serious consideration to the subject of matrimony. She likes you exceedingly, however, and I must trust to your eloquence to convince her that marriage is not such a terrible ordeal after all."

The count's eyes sparkled beneath their lowered lids. "Ah, madame," he said, "how charming it is, that modest reticence, that girlish fear of—they know not what. How admirable must have been the training that leaves such freshness and purity in the virgin heart, folded like a bud which the ardent sun of love alone may open into perfect bloom."

"Yes, count, yes," said Mrs. Levison rather vaguely. "You speak like a poet, really. How admirably you will suit my dear child; she is so romantic herself."

But Pharamond was not one whit blinded by Mrs. Levison's manoeuvres. He felt sure that Sheba did not care for him in the least, and did not want to marry him. That, however, made no difference to his intentions. He was far too used to seeing marriages "arranged" in the commonplace, cold-blooded French fashion, to care whether his intended wife had any favourable regard for him, or not.

Marriage would soon settle all that girlish romantic nonsense, and he had never before seen any woman capable of inspiring that mingling of passion, desire and inaccessibility that made up Sheba's charm for him. He was determined she should be his, and the fact that she kept him off and would not at once accept his suit, rather added zest to its enforcement. The parents were on his side—as a matter of course the girl would give in also.

Meantime, he amused himself with Bessie. All that week Sheba remained a prisoner in her own room, seeing no one but her mother and Bessie Saxton. Every day Mrs. Levison formally reiterated her question, "Will you accept Count Pharamond?" and every day came the same dogged reply, "No, I will not." Mrs. Levison grew alarmed as the day of the dinner-party drew nigh. Sheba must appear at it, and she had told the count he should have his answer then.

She felt assured that no communication had taken place between Sheba and Meredith, yet she felt at a loss to account for the girl's radiant looks and obstinate firmness. Was it possible that she had some hope, some scheme for deliverance? Bessie Saxton laughed and assured her it was impossible; still when the night really arrived Mrs. Levison was in a state of fever and anxiety, that even sal-volatile and other remedies could not quite allay. As the hour struck, and one by one the invited guests assembled, she grew even more nervous.

Pharamond appeared, calm, radiant and hopeful, and dressed with his usual exquisite care. Then, as Mrs. Levison's nervous glance went from the clock to the door, it was thrown open and Bessie Saxton and Sheba entered the room.

Sheba wore the same dress that she had worn when Pharamond had first seen her, and he thought she looked even more lovely. There was a repressed fire—a something wild, eager, excited about the girl that stimulated his jaded passions, and lent her additional charm.

He greeted her almost as a lover, and her cold return of his words and looks in no way damped their ardour.

"It will be something to fire and change all that," he said to himself, with a little fierce exultant glow at his heart. "It will not

last, of course, any more than the bloom of the peach—still, mine will be the lips to kiss off the bloom. For the rest—*n'importe*."

Then dinner was announced, and for the first time in her life Sheba laid her hand on his proffered arm, and followed by many a curious and watchful gaze went out of the room by his side.

All during dinner she scarcely spoke. Only now and then her eyes—frightened and full of dread—turned to Bessie Saxton, who was seated opposite. Then as if deriving comfort or encouragement from that source, she would resume her pretence of eating, or again return those stiff monosyllabic replies which was all the response she made to the count's eloquence. It amused him to watch her blushes and her evident distress, just as it added zest to his dinner to glance at a tiny note under cover of his *serviette*—a note which had been slipped into his hand as he had greeted Bessie Saxton.

"*Diable!*" he thought, "she gets imprudent. However, it is not for me to say nay to the caprices of a pretty woman."

When the long wearisome meal was over, he contrived to hold the door open for the ladies to pass through, and as Bessie Saxton passed, he whispered low and hurriedly in her ear, "An hour after midnight."

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## CHAPTER XXXIX.

### BAFFLED.

WHEN Pharamond re-entered the drawing-room, flushed with wine and bearing himself as a victorious conqueror, he saw neither Sheba nor Bessie Saxton were there.

Mrs. Levison approached him with apologetic murmurs. "My poor child is suffering with a severe headache," she said; "she begs me to make her excuses. She will see you to-morrow morning in the library at ten o'clock."

Pharamond concealed his disappointment skilfully. He had fully expected to have the girl's answer to-night. However, a few hours, he told himself, would not be long in passing, and then—

Still his brow looked dark and ominous, the girl was taking too much on herself. He wondered what had made Bessie Saxton retire so early. It was unusual, and it left him to his own resources. He did not like the assembled guests; there was a vulgarity, a self-consciousness, about them that grated on his nerves, for bad as his moral character might be, Pharamond

was fastidious about society and knew at a glance the difference between social veneer and the real article. He felt decidedly bored, and welcomed most cordially the departure of the last guest and his consequent freedom. He at once retired to his own room, escorted by his servile host. Once there he threw off his dress coat and stiff tie, and putting on a loose soft dressing-gown, established himself in an easy chair with a cigar, and a French novel.

Silence began to fall over the house. Footsteps died away along the corridors, doors opened and shut, lights were extinguished; Pharamond still read and smoked, and from time to time glanced at the clock ticking loudly on the mantelpiece. At last he drew forth a small scented note and once more attentively studied its directions; then approaching the lamp, he lit the paper by its flame and let it slowly smoulder into ashes.

As he did so the clock chimed the hour after midnight. He turned the lamp low, and going to his door, opened it and looked out. The passage was all in darkness. He re-entered his room, lit a candle, and holding it in his hand went out once more and stood in the carpeted corridor, looking down its dark and silent length.

"The third door on the right," he muttered as he blew out the light and placed the candlestick within his own doorway. "*Pardieu!* I don't half like it. If it should be a trick."

\* \* \* \* \*

Meanwhile Mr. Levison had been detained by one excuse and another from seeking his own dressing-room. His wife had so much to say and to consult him about, that she appeared unwilling he should think of retiring, and even permitted him to smoke his postprandial cigar in the sacredness of her own luxurious chamber. But the cigar was burnt out, and Mr. Levison's prolonged yawns gave evidence of a growing inclination to pay his devotions to the drowsy god, when suddenly there pealed through the silent house a long piercing shriek.

He started to his feet. Mrs. Levison faced him white and trembling.

"Good God!" she cried. "What's that?"

She snatched up a candle and rushed down the corridor; he wondered that she made straight for Sheba's room. It seemed to him that the cry had come from the other end of the passage, and he ran to a door through which he saw a gleam of light.

Pushing it open unceremoniously, he found himself face to face with Count Pharamond, who, livid with rage and consterna-

tion, was supporting in his arms the seemingly unconscious figure of Bessie Saxton!

Her fair hair streamed over her bare white shoulders—her eyes were closed—the loose muslin gown she wore had fallen open at the throat . . . . Mr. Levison stared aghast and horror-stricken at the sight.

Then for one brief instant, the instinct of manhood mastered prudence and policy. He sprang forward, and seizing the Frenchman by the throat, he shook him till his teeth chattered like castanets.

"What the devil does this mean?" he shouted fiercely. "How dare you bring your d—d French manners into a respectable house! This young lady is in my charge—under my roof. What are you doing here at this hour?"

Like a beaten cur, yet with rage struggling for supremacy, Pharamond stood there livid and speechless.

Bessie had fallen to the ground—not ungracefully—at the moment when Mr. Levison seized her supporter, and there lay white and still and in picturesque disarray, the first object on which Mrs. Levison's eyes fell as, attracted by the noise, she too rushed into the room.

For a moment she stood there speechless. The blood rushed into her face; shame, disgust and baffled fury thrilled her by turns. The one explanation that seemed possible to herself, showed that she had been the dupe of cleverer and more scheming brains, and the sight of that still white figure seemed to incense her more than the unexplained outrage incensed her indignant husband.

As for Pharamond, he remained absolutely speechless.

When Levison saw his wife, he motioned to her to attend to Bessie, then turning to his guest, he said in a low, fierce tone, "Now, sir, follow me; this must be explained at once."

And Pharamond, with one bitter glance of baffled rage at the still immovable figure, sullenly bowed his head and followed his host from the room.

It was a long time before Mrs. Levison's efforts to restore the unconscious girl were rewarded with success, and when at last Bessie opened her eyes, she appeared far too terrified and exhausted to give any explanation of this occurrence.

She fell from one hysterical fit into another, and Mrs. Levison was well-nigh distracted. She dared not call for assistance, as she was terrified lest the servants should gain any knowledge of

the scandal, and between her wrath at Bessie's foolish behaviour, and Pharamond's incomprehensible conduct, her state of mind was not enviable.

When the girl at last grew calm and Mrs. Levison could leave her for a moment, she flew in search of her husband.

He was pacing the corridor alone, gloomy and perturbed.

"How is she now?" he asked eagerly as he saw his wife approaching.

"Oh," cried Mrs. Levison impatiently, "she is right enough—what I want to know is where Sheba has gone. She was not in her room when I went there just now. Have you seen her?"

"Not in her room," echoed Mr. Levison wonderingly. "Gracious! has every one gone mad to-night?" He hurried off, his wife following; suddenly he stopped. "By the way," he said, "what made you go to her room? The cry came from the other end of the corridor."

Mrs. Levison looked confused. "I—I thought it came from there," she stammered.

They opened the door and went into the room. It was untenanted. The bed had not been slept in. Sheba's evening dress was flung carelessly on it, and as Mrs. Levison rushed from place to place, her cries and exclamations conveyed her fears.

"She has run away, I am sure of it. See—her hat is gone—and her cloak—and her every-day dresses—her linen—her boots . . . Oh, the wicked, treacherous girl—so much for her seeming obedience . . . and after all my plans . . . Oh, what am I to do? . . . What am I to do?"

"Do?" echoed her husband stupidly. "Well, for that matter we can't do anything. She's evidently bolted and that's an end of it. The other case is far more serious. Mr. Saxton confided his daughter to my care. How can I look him in the face after such a disgraceful business? . . . The only thing now is for Pharamond to marry her. It's plain Sheba won't have him. I suppose he's not quite a blackguard, and will make the only reparation a gentleman can."

Mrs. Levison sat up in the chair into which she had fallen, and stared at him in utter stupefaction. "*What* are you saying?" she gasped. "Pharamond marry Bessie . . ." Then a light seemed to break in upon her and her face grew white and set . . . "I see it all—now," she muttered. "They have both conspired to dupe me. Bessie has helped Sheba to elope with this singer, and it suited her to compromise herself so as to gain the count. . . . The vile, bold scheming girl, and I . . . I have been playing into her hand all the time!"

Which in fact was the case, though like many other vain and self-confident people, Mrs. Levison had never dreamed that she was being used as the cat's-paw was used for the roasted chestnuts, until the scorch of the fire quickened her feelings, and betrayed her folly.

When Bessie had spoken of a plot to force Sheba into compliance with her mother's wishes, it still had not occurred to her that anything so disgraceful or so scandalous could have been in the girl's mind. She had supposed that Pharamond's visit would have given him the position of an accepted suitor, and, in a way, compelled Sheba to accept his attentions. For the rest, Bessie's persuasions and her own commands might have been naturally expected to break down the girl's obstinacy. But now she saw that she had only hastened a catastrophe instead of averting one.

By the next morning every one in the house knew that Sheba Ormatroyd had left her parents' roof, and most of them had heard Mr. Levison's heartily expressed satisfaction at the event, and his declaration that he was deuced glad to be rid of his troublesome step-daughter. In vain Mrs. Levison begged him to follow, or try to find some trace of her; in vain she wept and bemoaned her hard fate during the whole of that day. Her husband was inexorable—he raged and swore—he said that as Sheba had gone off with this man she must abide by the consequences—he never wished to hear of her, or see her again. She had been nothing but a worry and annoyance to him ever since she had been under his roof and he was thankful to wash his hands of her and her affairs once and for all. The sooner her mother came to his way of thinking the better.

The affair of Bessie Saxton was to his mind much more serious. He had a great respect for Mr. Saxton, and a genuine admiration for the bright, rattling, and amusing Bessie. That such an insult should have been offered to her under his roof angered him far more than Sheba's escapade.

He had "had it out" with the count, to use his own expression, and that high and mighty individual had found himself—for once—fairly taken to task for his profligacy and utterly unable to frame a tenable excuse for what had happened. When Mr. Levison had stormed himself out, there was nothing for the count to say but that he would do whatever the young lady wished, though, having said it, he registered a vow that Bessie should yet pay dearly enough for her trick. Of course it was a trick. He never doubted it now; but he felt none the less furious because he had been duped by it.

As for Bessie herself, she remained in her room all day. No one came near her save Mrs. Levison's maid with an occasional

offer of service, or refreshment. Towards dusk, however, she received a note from Mr. Levison, and the sight of its contents seemed to restore her to her usual spirits. It was brief, but to the point :

“DEAR MISS SAXTON,

“I feel as if I could never forgive myself for what has happened under my roof, but set your mind at rest. Pharamond has promised to marry you as soon as you are willing. Will you give him an interview in my presence and that of Mrs. Levison, at five o'clock this afternoon, to arrange everything? Rest assured I shall never permit a breath of scandal to touch your name, and Pharamond knows it.

“ Faithfully yours,

“ J. LEVISON.”

Bessie's eyes sparkled. The languor and indifference left her. She rose from the couch and dressed herself with unusual simplicity, but also with unusual good taste.

There was something chaste, saddened, subdued about her, quite in keeping with her position, as she glided into the library in the falling dusk.

Mr. Levison advanced to meet her with a fatherly and protecting air. His wife, who was seated on a low chair by the window, coldly extended her hand. Pharamond himself moved forward, and bowed low before the white and stately figure. But she met his eye, and a sudden pang of fear blanched her cheek and made her limbs tremble.

“My dear Miss Saxton,” said Mr. Levison tenderly, “there is an old proverb that says : ‘Least said—soonest mended.’ I quite agree with it. In the absence of your father I am here to lay before you the proposal of Count Pharamond. Will you marry him at as early a date as convenient to yourself? he wishes to return to his own land immediately.”

Bessie raised her drooping head and looked straight and fearlessly into the count's evil eyes. “Monsieur de Pharamond does me honour,” she said quietly. “I—accept his proposal.”

The Frenchman advanced, and bowed over the hand which he raised to his lips. “Mademoiselle, you have made me the happiest of men,” he murmured mendaciously.

The girl withdrew her hand and moved away to the seat where Mrs. Levison was watching the scene. She sank down beside her. “You must forgive me,” she murmured in a low, agitated voice. “I—I can explain all; Sheba would never have married



him—never—and he . . . . Oh! how can I tell you?—he owes it me. I had to do it to . . . . to save myself . . . . You must not blame me too severely—for I loved him, and he made me believe he loved me. Oh, dear Mrs. Levison, I have no mother . . . . no other friend here . . . . say you will forgive me, and be my friend as—as you have always been. You know how fond I am of you . . . . don't turn against me now."

And Mrs. Levison was so startled and so amazed, and, in a way, so touched by this confession, and the girl's tears and kisses and broken words, that she almost forgot her rage and indignation of the previous night, and ended by promising forgiveness. Mr. Saxton was written to that night—so was Aunt Allison, and Bessie informed Pharamond that with her relatives' sanction she would be prepared to marry him that day month.

She would not see him alone for a single moment, and he left Oaklands and went back to his own rooms in Sydney, feeling that for once in his life he had been outwitted. The feeling was not a pleasant one. He was furious with Sheba, and still more furious with Bessie; but, bad as he was at heart, he had kept her secret, and was prepared to atone for the scandal he had brought upon her name. A marriage—such a marriage—would not lie very heavily on his sense of moral obligation, so he told himself, and he knew very well that the girl who had outwitted him now, would repent in dust and ashes the day that made her legat' his own.

She had gained her object; for the rest, the future would show who would have the greatest cause to repent that that object *had* been gained.

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## CHAPTER XL.

### PERIL.

It was full summer.

In the towns people panted and groaned under the burden of a heat which made life scarce endurable. Even up among the hills in the great sheltered bush districts it was bad enough; but there was a possibility of shade and coolness there, which was impossible in the midst of busy streets, and unsheltered pavements.

Beyond the shores of Port Philip, and leaving the city far out of sight, stood a low, rambling wooden building—more like a farmhouse than anything else—surrounded by a forest of the invariable eucalyptus trees.

The verandah was almost buried beneath a profusion of creepers, and was dark and cool even in the hot summer afternoon. A few

bamboo chairs were scattered about, a low wicker table was covered with books and papers. All the windows were opened and showed the rooms beyond, furnished with a simplicity almost primitive, their only decoration being the lavish display of flowers which stood about in great bowls, or wreathed with overhanging tendrils the wooden brackets on the whitewashed walls. Through one of the windows opening on to the verandah, a girl stepped suddenly, and advancing to the opening where the creepers were curtained off, she looked eagerly out in the direction of the fields beyond.

They were gold now with ripened corn, and beyond the strong rough palings the "bush" stretched in great uneven patches, waiting for further cultivation.

Two or three cows were lying lazily down amidst the short dry grass ; at intervals a dog barked, or a bird gave vent to a shrill, clear note, otherwise the stillness was intense as the heat.

The girl shaded her eyes from the sun with one hand, and then apparently distinguishing what she expected, turned aside and began clearing away the litter of books and papers from the table. A little soft smile hovered about her lips, her eyes shone with a steadfast, happy light that made them wondrously beautiful.

The girl, in fact, was no other than Sheba Ormatroyd—but a very changed Sheba Ormatroyd from the one who had fled away in the secrecy of night to the care and protection of a man of whom she knew indeed very little ; but for whom she had a love boundless as her trust, and faith, and passionate devotion.

The change was such a change as only shows itself in a face that is the mirror of the soul, and Sheba's soul had, as it were, leaped into life and feeling and knowledge, with one bound.

Freedom had come to her ; love had come to her ; the gifts of the tree of knowledge had come to her ; and all that had been crushed and hidden and subdued so long, seemed to have burst forth into a magnificent vitality that gave her the grandest dower of womanhood—peace of mind, and beauty of soul.

Presently a step made her turn round ; on her face that flash and glow of welcome that only comes with the advent of what is beloved. "It is you, Paul, at last. I thought I saw you coming. What have you done with Müller?"

"I left him talking to Black Joe. One of their usual arguments."

The girl laughed—a bright happy laugh that had the true ring of mirth in it. She still busied herself preparing the table, but the flush on her cheek betrayed consciousness, and there was a little nervous tremor about the busy hands.

He watched her silently ; then, as if obeying some mastering impulse, he suddenly approached and drew her to his side and looked down into her eyes with a long, eager, passionate look—the look of one who rather asks for assurance of love, than acknowledges its certainty.

"Oh ! my dearest," he murmured, and stooped and touched her lips eagerly, and yet with a certain fear that seemed to chill the caress.

She clung to him for a moment in a silent half-pathetic way. "What is it, Paul ?" she asked timidly. "Nothing has happened ? . . . No fresh trouble ?"

"No," he said, and gently stroked the thick dark hair from her brow. "Nothing fresh. I should think," and he laughed bitterly, "that fate had about done her worst for us. There could hardly be anything else to happen, after——"

"Oh, hush," she interrupted, and raised her head from his shoulder, and stood facing him with the warm colour flushing her soft cheeks. "Have we not agreed to forget that ? Why should it trouble you ? . . ."

"It does trouble me," he said gravely. "How could it be otherwise ? Night and day I think of it. God knows I would sooner have forfeited my own life than done you wrong . . . and now look what I have made of yours."

"Oh, Paul—Paul !" she cried brokenly. "Have I not told you again and again that to be near you, within sight of your face and sound of your voice, is enough for my happiness ? . . . I would not go back to the old misery, the old dumb, repressed, cheerless life, not for all the wealth and honour the world could give. And after all," she added softly, "it was not your fault. I will never allow that."

"No," he said with a heavy sigh, "not my fault that the dead returned—but mine that has placed you in such a position ; not mine that I love you and that you love me, and yet . . . we scarcely dare to speak of it."

"What matters that ?" she said lifting those great glorious eyes to his own. "We know it—we *feel* it. It is as the air we breathe—the light of our days. It is about us and around us . . . that is enough—for me," she added very low.

He drew her to him once again with a reverent and hesitating grace. . . . "Oh," he said softly, "how generous women are when they love ; and how little men deserve that they should be . . . If I had but known you sooner . . . if the past could be undone——"

Her colour changed, she trembled from head to foot. "It

cannot," she said brokenly. "When you came to me that night . . . and told me the story of your life . . . and how, as if in very mockery, that woman had crossed your path again, and that it was not possible to fulfil your promise until you were sure you were free . . . as you had believed . . . I told you I was perfectly content to trust you and—wait. But nothing could have induced me to go home—to such a home. That last piece of treachery was the finishing stroke to all I had borne so long. I would have begged my bread sooner than owe food or shelter to them, ever again. I told you so . . . And then Müller came forward and said he would be my father and protector, and so I took the old place, dear Paul, and became your child's teacher once more; and we have been very happy and merry over our new relationship, and so we might always be, it seems to me, for I want nothing on earth save to know you love me, and to feel you are near me."

"Because," he said, "you are but a girl, and innocent and pure, and easily content, and I verily believe you care nothing for the world, or what it would say or think."

"The world," she laughed gaily. "Fancy the world and—Sheba Ormatroyd! How incongruous. It is not even aware of her existence."

"Still," he insisted, "when you gain more wisdom you may blame me, and then—well, then I should kill myself, I think, for I could never bear to hear you reproach me, Sheba. God knows I am no coward, but to think I have such a life as yours to answer for—to see its gifts and treasures thrown at my feet, and yet to feel that I am making such base use of them. . . ."

"Paul," she cried, "you will break my heart if you speak so. Listen to me. Perhaps you don't understand how I love you—how I feel that to you I owe every joy I have ever known. It is not easy for me to express myself, and words seem poor and weak when one wants them to say what is in one's very soul—one's whole life and being. *Nothing* you could do would seem to me wrong . . . how could it? That you love me is as wonderful to me now as it was the first hour I heard it, and that fact alone is enough. . . . I care for nothing else. . . ."

"But you will," he said "some day and then you will say I did you a great wrong—"

"Never," she said solemnly as she lifted her eyes to his. "I am safe—at rest—happy. True, as Müller says, it is not always easy to act brother and sister, but save for some chance outbreak . . . like this, Paul, we have done it very successfully. It is understood that we love each other . . . it is also understood

that as soon as freedom comes to you, I am ready to be your wife. Till then I do not find it hard to live our free, careless Bohemian life. These past months have held for me perfect, unclouded happiness."

"And so," he said passionately, "they have for me. Still, Sheba, you do not understand that sometimes it is hard. A man's love is not like a woman's."

"I suppose," she said sadly, "I do not content you as you do me."

"Perhaps," he said, softly kissing her eyes, "you content me so much that I become—discontented. Forgive me, dear; I have no right to say so much. It was not in our agreement, was it? But for a whole week I have not had a word with you alone, not a kiss—not anything to satisfy my restless heart, save some shy fleeting look from those glorious eyes. How I love your eyes, Sheba!"

"Do you?" she said laughing, yet crimsoning beneath his gaze. "I am glad of it—glad and proud that thy handmaiden has found grace in thy sight, my lord."

"Don't," he whispered passionately; "you must not be humble to me—the colder, the prouder, the better."

"And yet," she said, "just now you seemed to blame me because I was—distant."

"Well," he said half laughing, "a week is too long, and Müller is a veritable watch-dog. I wonder how he came to spare us this *tête-à-tête* to-day. Probably he thought you were having a siesta like Paul."

"It was too hot to sleep," she said, "so I came out here."

"I am thankful for that small mercy," he said, smiling down at her. "Oh, Sheba, Sheba, what blushes are those. Tell me again you are happy."

"You are insatiable, Paul," she said, drawing herself away from his eager arms. "I have told you enough for one day—too much—and yet—oh, why should I fear to tell it you again? I might as well deny I breathe, as that I love you—"

"Darling," he cried, "it is more than I deserve, God knows!"

"And—loving you," she went on, her eyes kindling and the brilliant colour glowing in either cheek, "has made me, I think, in love with life. I am no more myself. I am never alone, never unhappy. I have learned there is something worth living for—dying for—the one great and glorious gift Heaven gives to earth and has given to me—to love, and be beloved."

Then suddenly she paused, as if ashamed. "I say too much," she cried, and trembled and turned away because there was that in his face which frightened her for the self-control that had

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always been between them as yet, and because she had begun dimly to understand that love to a man has less of the divine and more of the mortal in its nature, than ever it has to a woman. He was still a god to her, and she worshipped him as such, but she to him held all that was beautiful and accessible even amidst her divinity. Therein lay the danger that as yet neither would acknowledge, but that made itself felt in moments such as these.

Sheba's position was indeed a critical and a strange one. Bessie Saxton had represented her own plot as being the invention of Mrs. Levison, and Sheba's loathing and horror had driven her almost desperate. Then and there she had decided upon leaving home as Meredith had entreated her to do, and with Bessie's help it had been easily managed.

It was when they had arrived at Brisbane, that Paul found his plans were destined to be overthrown. He sang with his usual success to a crowded house and an enthusiastic audience. Sheba was not present, being too fatigued with the long journey. At the close of the opera a bouquet was thrown to him from a side box. He picked it up and glanced at the place from which it had come. One glance—that was all—but it turned his life to tragedy. It sent him sick and reeling to his dressing-room like one seized with a mortal illness. It told him that the woman who had been his life's evil genius, who had deserted and betrayed him and her child, and had left him for dead while she fled with her low-born paramour—that this woman, his wife still, since the law had bound them and had yet to dissever those bonds, was alive and well, and to all appearance in the enjoyment of affluence and luxury. The shock was all the more terrible in that it was so utterly unexpected.

And yet is it not always "the unexpected that happens?" It was only a very old story repeated. A young man's mad folly and its consequences; having their resurrection just as he had begun to assure himself they were for ever dead and buried.

He had quarrelled with his father on this girl's account; had married her and brought her out to the colonies in the full confidence of finding wealth and fortune. And this was the end. The woman had wearied of the struggle for riches, and had fled from her husband with a gold-digger whom fortune had lavishly favoured. He had followed them from place to place, partly with the brute instinct of vengeance, partly with the resolve of getting back the child. He had found her at last; there had been a desperate quarrel, and she had drawn a pistol and deliberately shot him and left him for dead. From that time he heard nothing of her, until one night in the Sydney streets he came across the drunken ruffian who had been her companion. The man, who

was in the last stage of *delirium tremens*, had been just picked up out of the harbour, where he had thrown himself, under the impression that his clothes were on fire. They were taking him to the hospital when Meredith saw and recognized him. He died at noon next day, confessing to Paul, who sat beside him, that his guilty wife was also dead, having been drowned in a boating accident two years before on the Murray River.

Paul believed the story, which indeed seemed authentic enough and was verified by newspaper accounts, as well as the oath of a dying man. Perhaps the man believed it also. It was too late to determine that now, but Meredith only learnt its falsity when too late to repair the wrong he had all unconsciously wrought on another innocent life.

In utter desperation he took what seemed to him the best and only course. He confessed the whole miserable story to Sheba herself, without extenuation or plea of any sort. He fully expected she would at once leave him and go back to her parents, perhaps even in time marry the hated and objectionable Pharamond. But no such thought crossed the girl's mind.

She was too utterly unconventional to regard the matter as one more worldly and experienced would have regarded it. She saw in Paul Meredith a victim, not an offender; and she was young and pure, and strong, and brave, and she loved him with all her great ardent soul. That love seemed to give her a right to be near him, to comfort him when he needed comfort, to strengthen him when he was weak and unhappy.

"I will not leave you," she had said when he had told her all, and told her too that now the choice must rest with herself, until such time as he could free himself from the dishonouring entanglement that still held him. "I will be your sister . . . and Müller shall still be my father. I am not afraid, Paul. The world is nothing to me—and its opinions less. I love you and I can trust you, and there is no one else in all the wide earth to whom I can say those words."

Then he had knelt at her feet, as one kneels to a saint, and the tears had rushed to his eyes as brokenly and feebly he tried to thank her.

"As there is a God above," he murmured below his breath, "you shall never repent that trust."

So it had come to pass that they were all staying for a brief summer holiday in this wild bush nook. No one had asked any questions as to the relationship between the young girl and the two men, it being generally supposed that Sheba was the daughter of the old German, and Paul a relation of both.

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They were essentially a very happy quartet. Müller was devoted to the girl, and she expanded mentally and physically under the genial influence, the sheltering love, and universal content and peacefulness of that home atmosphere. The child adored her, and the consciousness of Paul's love was like perpetual sunshine, but Paul himself was not happy, and gradually she began to perceive it. He was restless, gloomy, absent; and at times she grew fearful as to whether his love for her was the deep absorbing thing that she had imagined.

In that doubt she wronged him. He loved her as he had never thought it was in him to love woman again after that one terrible lesson; but he knew that the less he spoke of, or betrayed that love, the better it would be for both their sakes. He had schooled himself to be her brother and comrade; it was only now and then that the fire would burst forth, and he would become lover as well.

Müller watched them with argus eyes, having indeed formed so strong and deep an attachment to the girl that he began to regard her as his own daughter. He knew well enough the peril in which they both stood—that conventionalities were apt to be irksome—that their sips of companionship created but a fiercer thirst—that to be young, passionate and beloved was an exquisite happiness, but yet an imminent danger.

And there were times, when watching them both, and noting only too clearly how the mere presence or contact of either was enough to transfigure the simplest phase of their daily lives, he would ask himself—half fearful of a reply he dared not give—"How will it end?"

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## CHAPTER XLI.

### "A GUARD OF HONOUR."

THE heat grew more intense and stifling as the night advanced, and Sheba, lying under the shrouding mosquito curtains, and listening to the monotonous buzz of those indefatigable insects, tried vainly to sleep.

All sorts of thoughts and memories came crowding into her wakeful brain. Memories of her childhood, her old home, her old pets, and the life that now looked so far off and strange that sometimes she had to pause, as it were, and ask herself if she were really and truly the same Sheba Ormatroyd.

There is nothing more puzzling in life than the change it brings to ourselves at certain seasons, so that the child looking back on



the infant, the youth on the child, and the man or woman on the youth, cannot but ask, "Was I really—*that?*"

The change is inexplicable, nevertheless it is as surely a law of nature as the inexorable Fate which brings us into the world, and gives us a definite career when there; which also dowers us with a definite stage of progression from infancy to old age with their diverse passions and desires—removing us without our will, even as it has created us without our consciousness—a Fate whose power not all man's knowledge can fathom, nor all his science control.

There is something terrible in such a fate when we let ourselves think of it. Perhaps that is the reason why so few do let themselves think of it, but prefer to eat, drink and be merry; and make believe life is perpetual holiday.

For it is an awful thought that here we stand on the shores of a dark and endless sea, whose name is death, and that all the great mysteries of the universe are around and about us, yet tell us nothing save that Time and Eternity are one and the same thing.

Science but gropes blindly along its stony road, being constantly met by the mandate, "thus far and no further." Religion has been twisted and perverted into such bewildering and shapeless forms that the soul grows weary with searching for a God, who wears always the face and form and garniture of man; and if all the weary and toiling creatures who people the earth stopped to think of these mysteries at all, they would go mad with the horror and hopelessness of life. So perhaps it is Heaven's mercy that the thinking souls are few, and that the needs of the body are imperative, and that the soup-pot needs replenishing, and the child's smile becomes a cry unless its mouth is filled, and so the sympathy of humanity is narrowed into selfishness, and we sit individually each on our own small throne of importance, and try to shut our ears and eyes to the misery and hopelessness of the world at large.

Sheba, as yet, knew nothing of the great human world of cities, and of the crime and want, and suffering and misery, that make up the portion of one half the race of man.

That is the best of the new world. Life is more equal; it is less a thing of competition and struggle; a hand-to-hand fight with hungry labourers ready to undersell one another for a bare existence.

Brains have their full value, so have strength, skill and intelligence. This is saying nothing new of course, but it is a pity that it should not be reiterated in the ears of a class who obstinately cling to beggary and starvation, when they might have food and labour almost for the asking.

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Man's nature seems essentially cruel. He is cruel to the brute whose labour he exacts, cruel to woman when she is weak and at his mercy, cruel to his own sex and to himself in the aggregate. How he grudges the wage of labour when once he is payer instead of payee; how he invents laws which are beautifully adapted to the just and the unjust; how he prates of freedom, yet is in himself a secret tyrant, ready to seize the reins of government the instant they are wrested from one form of rule, and to adjust them to another which great words may have dignified, but alas! few great acts have ever ennobled into what the words seemed to promise.

For the great leader who preaches equality never forgets the cash-box, any more than the high priest of any order ever forgets the offertory, or the trappings that dignify his superior person.

So that we can but see in all forms and conditions of history that the *nature* of the individual is always the same, though circumstances may lead him to play his part with more or less credit. However self-sacrificing and noble his actions may be—up to a certain point—once *that* point is reached, selfishness and self-importance invariably assert themselves, and the fact of his advancing even one step ahead of his fellow-men is quite enough to make him vainglorious.

The general, the statesman, the lawgiver, the priest, the man of business, the inventor, the artizan and the artist, nay, even the author and the critic, all develop this same trait.

We call it human nature, because human nature is essentially a thing of self, and the pride of self, and the glorification of self, and the care and nurture and consideration of self. Therefore, it cannot help being what it is, and it will never be levelled into one uniform equality, because you cannot level brains, and there will always be the fool, and the patient man, and the timid, and the dreamer, and the hypocrite, and some one is bound to rule them, and get the best of them even in a small way. Perhaps this accounts for nature's beneficent providing of the Jew, for he is a creature of resource and a grasper of opportunity, and one of the best utilizers of the needs of his fellow-man, provided that fellow-man has the good fortune to be a Christian.

But this is a long diversion from Sheba Ormatroyd and the mosquitoes.

She tossed from side to side, wide-eyed, feverish and sleepless, living over and over again in memory the short phase of her actual years; wondering a little what her mother had said of her conduct, and whether Pharamond was reconciled to the answer his suit had received, and what Bessie was doing, and if Aunt

Allison had heard of her escapade, and what Noel Hill would say and think about it.

She felt instinctively that he would not approve of what she had done, though she was far from imagining any personal or more selfish motive of disapprobation, than the one of friendship and interest.

But he was so good, so self-sacrificing. What could he know of that unhappy home life, that cruel tyranny, that shameless bartering which had at last forced her into open revolt?

Had not her whole life been more or less a struggle and a repression, a constant giving in to others, when her soul had all the time craved for love, knowledge, peace, the fulness of deeper things, the touch of wider sympathies. Had she not always been alone as far as any comprehension of her nature went, until that one glorious hour of her life when love had touched her with his divine chrism, and in the strength and beauty of another life she first recognized the perfecting of her own.

What use to speak of it?

What comprehension had natures like her mother's, or Mr. Levison's, of love such as she felt for Paul Meredith? They had mocked at the bare mention of the word which to her had been as the very holy of holies. Laughed it and her to scorn, until she had felt shamed and sickened, and only longed to hide herself from the sight and sound of such mockery.

Love had come to her in the guise of an angel, as, indeed, he only comes to the very innocent, and the very young. He had found her heart empty, and had filled it even to overflowing. Perhaps the greatness of her own passion and her own soul helped that overflow, for assuredly Paul Meredith was no hero; yet to her he was the magician whose spell had changed all her life, the embodiment of dreams still half divine. She felt no need now of any world that held not him, of any life that should cease to bring the echo of his voice to her ears. For three months she had lived in the absorption and isolation of a dream, but while she revelled in its sweetness and trembled at its power, she knew that to the world without it would seem but as the folly of a poet's fable, as the daylight to the blind worm that burrows in the earth, unheeding the glory of the sun.

But there was no need to speak of these feelings to others. She herself was absolutely content, and, for the first time in her life, absolutely happy. Had that life been different, love would have meant for her a struggle with duty; but what duty did she owe to the tyrannous abuse of a law that makes a parent the ruler of a child's destiny? That demands blind obedience, instead of

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rational submission. Beautiful as is the virtue of unselfishness, yet it can be strained to a point beyond moral or rational obligation, and it is hard to say on whom the greatest amount of misery is entailed, the exactor of such submission, or the giver of it. In either case a human life suffers, a human soul is dragged through abysses of darkness and agony and shame, and the gain seems small and insignificant after all, let us dignify it by what name we please—sacrifice, obedience, duty, honour. Do they hold any salve for the broken heart, the slaughtered youth, the anointed shame, which is no real marriage-rite, let the world say what it will?

And the pitiful part of it all is, that the sins and the sufferings, and the cruelties and oppressions, are all brought to bear on one little human life, all conspiring to crush its promise and wreck its future, when it might just as well be left to be happy, and hold its share of love and grow at peace and thankful, instead of rebellious and, too often, criminal.

We seem to grudge each other happiness, just as we grudge each other fortune or fame, or rank or success, or that ambiguous and ephemeral thing we designate as Luck. We grudge *that* most of all because it might so easily come to us individually, instead of going to our next-door neighbour, who is neither so deserving nor so likely to make a good use of it as ourselves. And the beauty of it all is that we never allow that we *do* grudge these things, or are even in the smallest degree envious of them. We build up fine phrases, airy fabrics, that crumble into dust the moment a wind of adversity touches the subject of our blatant congratulations; but for all that they *seem* hearty and sincere enough. It is only to our own secret hearts that we whisper that little ill-natured remark about "luck" and its by no means well-chosen recipients. It is probably some fellow-feeling of this nature that has led us to paint the Fates as blind, and to place a bandage over the eyes of justice, although she holds a balancing scale in her hand.

As yet Sheba had no practical experience of the ways of the world. She had learnt a great deal from old Müller, and the cravings of that hungry intellect had made her read and think a great deal more than most girls of her age; but of poverty, oppression, shame, of the colossal ignorance and suffering of one class of humanity, and the selfishness and indifference of another, she was comparatively ignorant. She read of them, but as yet they only came to her as her misty speculations of the old world came; that world of crowds and cities, and human bee-hives, and great manufactories, and vast stores of wealth, the like of which she was never likely to see in the colonies.

To-night, in the restlessness of mind and body that had come to her with the increasing heat, and the inability to sleep, she began to think of that other world, and to wonder whether she would ever see it.

"Perhaps he will take me some day," she thought, and blushed even in the darkness because of the thought, and then, feeling that sleep grew more impossible every moment, she pushed aside the curtains and went over to the window, and leaning there, stood looking out at the brilliant starlight, and the silver sheen of grass and flower, and watched the gentle flittings of birds and the soft movement of the dusky boughs until a longing seized her to be out there amidst the scents and shapes of the fragrant bush as in the old childish days that looked so far away.

All the rooms opened on to the verandah, and ten minutes later she was flitting over the grassy space that lay between the house and the fields of maize; a white slender shape with long dusky hair flowing unbound to her feet.

She came to the creek, and followed its course by the swamp oaks and gum trees, skirting the thicket of scrub by a path she had discovered for herself.

The moonlight flooded all around her with streams of liquid silver. The night was so clear, the air so transparent, that she could have seen to read without the slightest difficulty. She had no fear whatever. The few people near the place were simple kindly folk enough, and they all knew her by this time. She walked on and on with a curious sense of freedom and delight, thinking how foolish men were to spend such lovely hours as these in hot rooms and unrefreshing slumber.

She left the creek at last, and turning aside through the broken-down scrub came into a wide open space where some of the bush giants had been felled, and lay waiting the workmanship of man.

Here the grass was green and fresh by reason of the dense shade that even in the day-time kept off the burning sun, and all around the huge trunks of the gum trees towered in their glorious strength, and stretched away in endless aisles like the columns of some great cathedral.

As the girl stepped into the open space, and the moonlight fell on her white dress and dusky uncovered head, there came a little strange cry—half of fear, half of surprise—and some one stepped out of the lurking shadows and faced her, and the cry was echoed by her own lips as, hesitating and startled, she saw her lover standing before her in that moonlit solitude.

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"Paul!" she stammered.

"I thought you were a ghost," he said laughing a little as he came nearer to her across the silvered grass. "In the name of all that's wonderful, child, what brings you here at this time of night?"

"I could not sleep," she said, "and the bush tempted me. It is an old friend, you know; I thought I would go for a walk. I never dreamt——"

"You never dreamt that some one else might have the same idea," he said, smiling down at her flushing face. "Wonderful! is it not? and I was just thinking of you, and wishing that some kind fairy would transport you here. Still more wonderful. Who says Fate is not kind? Come here, my Sheba, and sit beside me. Since chance has sent us a charmed hour, and our faithful watch-dog is not at his post, we would be foolish not to make the best of it. What say you?"

"I am afraid, Paul," she said softly, "that I shall always say what you—wish."

She was standing before him, and he was looking into her great deep eyes; the moonlight lit her face with a rare and delicate charm, the rippling masses of her hair hung round her like a mantle. It struck Paul for the first time that she was almost beautiful. He had never as yet given much thought to her appearance, the charm she had for him lay so much deeper than in mere external loveliness, than colour and shape, or hair, or feature; but to-night she seemed to possess that charm, and all a woman's attributes of beauty with it.

That look lasted so long that it seemed to hold them in a trance, and when at last he held out his hand and drew her to the seat beside him on one of the fallen trees, she felt like one in some strange and beautiful dream.

The magnetism of that stronger presence seemed to bear her on along the current of its will. She knew it was such moments as these that transform life, and make its every other pain endurable. They sat there side by side, saying but little, and that only in murmurs, yet each heart was brimful of gladness, and felt with subtle consciousness the long dreamy pause, the grave untriring gaze, the soft lingering touch of some rare caress.

Of what could they speak save love. How it had come, so strangely and unexpectedly. What it had done for them—how netted their lives in strange entanglement. How much it still might do in the future that youth made hopeful.

Sheba listened in the deep and full content of self-surrender. All the garnered love and passion and worship of her enthu-

siastic nature had given itself to this man's keeping, and for the gift of his own love she deemed no sacrifice too great.

Some consciousness of this came to Paul Meredith in this hour of intoxication, but he was man enough and brave enough to thrust aside its perilous tempting. She was so young, so innocent, so utterly at his mercy, that she called forth all the innate chivalry of his nature, and made him her protector by very virtue of her own defencelessness.

"I have done her harm enough, God knows," he thought, as he met that look of passionate adoration, which she could no more withhold when she met his eyes than the sun can withhold its light from the dawn. "She shall never have it in her power to say I sullied the beauty of that pure soul."

It was that purity and that utter fearlessness that had so great a charm for him. She was utterly alone, and utterly at his mercy had he chosen to whisper the poison in her ears that adulterates the meaning of love in the mind of man. She had but her weak girl's heart to betray, or protect her, as she rested there against his own in the loneliness and silence of that magical midnight.

The chance that she might ever be his wife was far off and difficult to determine. He had taken steps to shake off the dishonourable fetters that for years he had disregarded, but his very dilatoriness had been pleaded as condonation, and in those great and half inaccessible districts, proofs were difficult to obtain, and justice an expensive luxury. But he did not tell the girl at his side of these things. He would not dim that beautiful trust and hope until it was impossible to satisfy them any longer, and when his conscience accused him and his own wider knowledge of the world and its code of honour whispered that he had placed this girl in a false position, and that every hour she remained under his roof added to his wrong-doing, he would salve the sting and hush the rebuke by the assurance that at least she was happy and at peace, and that long before a whisper of worldly wisdom could disturb her innocent paradise, she should be safely and honourably his own.

A great love is consecration—but so few loves are really "great" that the world has long agreed to class them under one heading. But when such a love comes to man or woman it is holier and nobler, and infinitely more beautiful than any sacramental rite, or priestly ceremony can make it. But it is rare.

It had its birth in the old days when men were chivalrous and women pure, and heart spoke to heart without prudery or worldly considerations. Perhaps men and women are too highly civilized

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now for idyllic virtues, so they have lost the old simple beautiful faith, and replaced it only by exotic passions, whose chief charm lies in the fact that they are illicit; or by cynical censure, which affects to disbelieve that love is of any worth—even if it does exist.

## CHAPTER XLII.

## COMPLICATIONS.

THE sun's rays were kindling the hill tops with gold, and bringing out all the beauty of the valleys.

The bush was alive with bird and animal life, the whirr of the locust, the laugh of the jackass, the scream of the small bright-winged paraquet, the sharp strange note of the coach-whip.

Sheba raised herself suddenly with a start.

"I believe I was asleep," she said.

"I believe so too," said Meredith laughing. "At least, you have not spoken a word for the last hour, and I was near following your example."

She drew herself away from his arms and stood upright, shaking back the long rippling masses of hair, and then twisting them round and round her head.

"I suppose," she said, "we ought to go home?"

He stood up also, smiling down at her from his tall height. His face was somewhat pale, the loose fair hair was blown back from his forehead by the breeze that stirred the trees; his eyes met hers, grave, fond, a little sad.

"I suppose so," he said. "I wish, Sheba, there was no one in the world to trouble about our actions, except ourselves."

"Why?" she asked, looking up and meeting his glance with something of wonder in her own.

"Why?" he echoed. "Oh, I suppose because I might keep you all to myself. We might live here, and I could work for you, and we should forget there was such a thing as a world at all, and be another Adam and Eve in our own paradise."

"I am afraid," said Sheba gravely, "you would soon get tired of your Eve. She is such an ignorant, unaccomplished person."

He smiled, that tender lingering smile that she knew so well now, and that always seemed to her like the warmth and beauty of sunlight.

"She is quite accomplished enough for me," he said, "and it would be difficult to tire of her; she has so many moods and



ways, one seems never quite to know her. That is in itself a charm. To get chance peeps into a mind that still has depths and depths to sound——"

Sheba was silent. The warm colour touched her face, and her eyes were downcast. She felt in her heart that the mere presence of her Adam made paradise for her, that she would have breasted every storm of fate so that only they might be *together*.

He held out his hand. "Come," he said; "let us go. This is a night to be remembered, only the worst of such a memory is, that it makes one athirst for repetition."

He drew her hand within his arm and they went across the clearing and came into the track by the creek. As they reached the water-side he paused. "I am not going further," he said. "I shall have a bathe here. You had best go in now and try and get a sleep before breakfast. I hope you won't meet Müller."

"Why?" asked Sheba in surprise.

"Oh," said Meredith. "He is such a strict guardian, he might not approve of midnight rambles."

"Was it wrong?" she said. "I did not know I should meet you, and I could not sleep, the house seemed unbearable."

"Of course it was not — wrong," laughed Meredith gaily. "Haven't we agreed to throw conventionality overboard, and all the humbug and nonsense bred of an ultra-refined civilization?"

They parted then, and Sheba went on to the house. Everything around was very still. The fowls alone were stirring in the hen-roost, and stretching their wings and throats to greet the day. As she crossed the garden to the verandah she came face to face with Müller.

He was attired in a loose suit of grey alpaca, and had a wide straw hat on his head. When he saw the girl he stopped short in evident surprise.

"And where have you been so early, *mein Fräulein*?" he asked. "Ach, what a night! The heat, the mosquitoes. I feel one big blister. I go to bathe my wounds in the creek."

"I will have breakfast ready by the time you come back," said Sheba. "Paul is having a bathe also."

"Paul?" He looked at her scrutinizingly. "So . . . you have been walking, eh? A lovers' meeting—the accident that is of chance."

"Well," said Sheba laughing gaily, "the truth is that I couldn't sleep, so I got up and went for a walk, and Paul couldn't sleep, and he also got up and went for a walk, and chance, as you call it, led us in the same direction."

The old man's brow darkened slightly. "So," he said again

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"Well, go within. You look as fresh as if sleep were of no moment. We shall be back in an hour for breakfast if you can get the black boy to get it ready."

He nodded carelessly and walked on, while Sheba went within and bathed and dressed, and then woke little Paul and helped him with his toilet, after which she laid the breakfast-table in the verandah, and set a great bowl of fresh-gathered roses in the centre, while the black boy brought hot rolls and tea and fresh eggs from the kitchen, and dishes of peaches and apricots from the garden, which was a natural orchard in itself.

Just as everything was ready the two men appeared, and they all sat down in the wide shady verandah to the pleasant morning meal.

Sheba soon noticed, however, that there was a cloud on Meredith's brow and that Müller was not so genial as usual. She wondered a little what had disturbed them, but asked no questions, only busying herself with little Paul, who was looking pale and languid with the heat, and had quite lost his appetite.

When breakfast was over they dispersed; Meredith to practise; Sheba to her household duties, the child following her everywhere, and Müller to his books and his big pipe in the verandah.

The girl usually devoted her mornings to the child, but to-day he seemed so languid and tired that she gave him no lessons, but merely took him on her knee and told him fairy tales until at last he fell asleep. She laid him down on his bed in the room he shared with her, and drew the mosquito net round him, and let down the blinds to keep out the sun.

Then she took up a pile of MSS. paper and went out into the shady verandah, intending to write till the mid-day meal was ready.

She had made considerable progress with her book, and the writing of it was quite a labour of love. The story in itself was simple, but her treatment of it was fresh and original, and even Müller, who subjected its progress to severe criticism, had professed a belief that it would do.

Having no further hope of assistance from Noel Hill, Sheba had determined to try to get it published in Melbourne, or run it in some paper or periodical there. She gave four or five hours every day to her work, until gradually it began to engross her and take hold of her, as all work does for which the author has any talent. She came out now into the verandah and went over to her table. To her surprise, she saw Müller was still there.

"Well, *mein Herr*," she said laughing, "are you going to smoke all the morning?"

He looked at her keenly under the shade of his fierce grey eyebrows. "I have been waiting for you," he said gruffly. "Put down that ; I want to talk."

"Certainly," said Sheba, as she deposited her pile of papers on the bamboo table. "I am quite at your service."

But when she had seated herself on one of the low cane chairs scattered about, and sat patiently waiting for him to begin the conversation, he seemed at a loss how to do it.

The clouds of smoke came thicker and thicker, and the girl sat there with her hands clasped on her knee; her face, pale now and a little serious, lifted to his own.

She grew uneasy at last at his silence.

"Has anything happened?" she asked. She was always dreading that something would ; she did not know what form or shape that *something* would take, but there was a vague fear at her heart that she would not be allowed to live for long in this peaceful paradise—that some serpent sting would find its way there and the old pain and the old unhappiness would be her portion once again.

"The mail was in this morning," said Müller at last. "No, you need not look alarmed—there was nothing for you. Happy are they who receive no letters ; they are spared one of the principal sources of worry in this world. Some day I must write a history of 'Letters that no one wants.' There are a lot of papers—some two months back. I see your friend Miss Saxton is married and has gone to England. What do you think of that?"

"Married!" cried Sheba amazed. "Bessie married? To whom?"

"To your quondam lover and admirer, Count Pharamond," said Müller with an odd little laugh. "Queer, isn't it? The heart at the rebound caught by the careful watcher—eh?"

"To Pharamond!" cried Sheba, fairly astounded at the news. "Oh, poor girl, poor Bessie! What could have made her do it?"

"Ambition, perhaps," said Müller, shrugging his shoulders. "She is a fool; she will be sorry for it. You see now why she helped you—she wanted to catch him for herself."

Sheba grew very pale. "Have you heard anything else?" she asked. "Anything from—from——"

"No," he said shortly ; "but Paul has had bad news. They say he will lose his case. She is going to defend it out of spite. Of course it means delay, and expense—and difficulty. She is in Melbourne now——"

"Yes?" said Sheba as he hesitated.

"Well," he went on, gravely regarding her, "it seems she has heard of—you."

"Of *me*?" the girl started, her hands dropped, her eyes, startled and dilated, fixed themselves on his face. "But what then—does it make any difference?"

"Yes," said Müller shortly; "it gives her a case, and it damages Paul's defence. Besides, the other man is dead. There is no one to prove the attempt on Paul's life—and it is all so long ago, and he has condoned it by his indifference. It will be long, difficult, complicated—the issue is impossible to determine, and meanwhile"—he looked at the girl's white face and beautiful, pained eyes—"meanwhile," he said sternly, "you are in a false position, and Paul is in a false position, and every day makes it harder for you both; especially"—and again he looked at her keenly—"especially if you are going for midnight rambles together."

The red blood dyed Sheba's cheeks the hue of the rose in her gown. She felt instinctively that she had in some way offended against that unwritten code of propriety which is an inherent instinct in feminine nature.

She drew herself up proudly. "It was an accident," she said. "I told you so."

"Nay," he said kindly, "I am not blaming you. But I love you as if you were my own child, and so must I be careful of you. You are young and innocent as a baby; of the world and of men you are quite ignorant; and Paul—he is good and true I know—but still, hearts are treacherous things."

"What did you mean?" she asked suddenly, "by saying that she had heard of me? How could she, and what have I to do with her?"

"Nothing, of course," he answered readily. "But it implies that Paul is only trying to get rid of her in order to marry again. The lawyers, they are sure to make the most of it. Now if I know anything of Paul, he will never allow your name to be dragged into the case, consequently he will have to withdraw it altogether, also consequently he will not get his freedom."

Sheba pushed the dark hair from her brow in a bewildered sort of way. "How strange they seem, these marriage laws," she said. "How could men make them?"

"That is hard to say, *meine liebe*. I think, myself, they made them to break them. That is what the world seems to convey when you study its inconsistencies."

"I wish," she said wearily, "I knew more. I have never heard, never learnt what that great world of men and women do.

I cannot understand how any one can vow to love a person, and then change. It seems to me that no law can make any difference."

"Oh, but it does," said Müller with his grim laugh. "The greatest difference. It binds men to keep their word to women. Experience shows there are plenty who would not, if the law did not force them."

"Then," said the girl proudly, "their love cannot be worth the having."

"Doubtless," he said, as he slowly filled the big pipe once more, "but they are just the largest class. Women are so foolish where they love, and so generous and so blind sometimes; and you see nature has not balanced the sexes equally. The weakest always suffers most. True, there are women who have given themselves to a man for love's sake only, and never repented it, or been made to repent it, but they are very rare exceptions. Man is less generous and less constant by nature. Therefore it is as well that the law fences him in with certain restrictions."

"Is change a law of men's love?" she asked dreamily. "I know in all the stories and all the books I have read about it there is change. It never seems to last. Is real life like that?"

"Real life is what we choose to make it," he said curtly. "There is no need to change if one is sure that one loves nobly and truly; but men, they love for beauty, for witchery, for inaccessibility, for devilry I often think, and then—the end is always the same—a spoilt life, a crime, or a cruelty, and a despair that the grave alone can end."

She shivered suddenly in the burning sultry heat of the noon-day. "It sounds terrible," she said. "And when one gives all one's heart, one's soul, one's life——"

"That is the worst," he said, "and I am afraid you are just one of those who would do that; afraid, nay, of it I am quite sure, and was sure from the first hour I looked into those great serious eyes, that speak for your soul."

"But Paul loves me truly," she said very low, and with the faint warm colour stealing back into her pale face. "I am sure I can trust him."

"Yes," said the old man thoughtfully, "he loves you truly, but I wish it were possible for him to marry you to-morrow. It is the long, weary waiting, the hope deferred, the sickening, slow suspense . . . that is what I dread for him . . . and you see the light of fame is a fierce thing; it shows up even what one would wish to conceal. He has left this opera company, but he will have other offers; indeed, he has had them. It will not be

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possible for him to live unknown and retired like this for very long, not unless he sacrifices his profession, and becomes a farmer or a cattle breeder."

She grew pale and anxious, and for the first time a thought crossed her mind to disturb its innocent tranquillity. "Is it my fault? Am I doing him harm?" she said huskily. "Don't be afraid to tell me. I—I would not have him suffer for all the world could offer."

"My dear," said the old German hurriedly, and with something of emotion in his face, "do not fancy such a thing for a moment. You are not to blame. You cannot help loving each other. It is what fate intended you to do. There are two things man's strength can never conquer, nor all his knowledge help him to evade. They are Love and Death. I seem to sit apart and look on your two lives, young, gifted, passionate, hopeful, and I have never looked on such lives but the curse and woe of sorrow and suffering have set their seal upon them. You may be different; I cannot tell; but I often find it in my heart to wish that Paul Meredith's life had never crossed yours."

"Do not say that," she cried passionately. "My life seemed never a life at all till I knew him. He has made it so happy that even if—if he should change, as you say men do, I would still have enough to thank him for in all the years to come."

"In all the years to come," echoed the old man. "You do not know what they may bring for this life, or the afterwards. Can death rob us of memory? It seems to me that love has an after life, eternal as the soul. So poets say, but the beauty of a theory does not prove its truth. Paul's soul may live again, and yet again, and have no memory of yours, or of his love for you."

She shuddered. "You are cruel," she said, "and your theories are more comfortless than the creeds you have disproved. If forgetfulness is death's only gift, why should we not seize any joy that presents itself here? What restrains us?"

"I don't know," he said with his grim laugh, "unless it is fear of consequences."

"That," she said, "would be only the argument of a coward." Müller rose abruptly. "Do not tell Paul so," he said. "Few men are worth a great love . . . I don't say he is not . . . Still men are but mortal . . . and you women, you will worship your idols as pure gold, and never see the foot of clay."

She smiled, though her mouth quivered a little with the passionate emotion that her words had betrayed.

"Is he my idol?" she said sottily. "I hope not; that would be unwise."

"And pray when was love ever anything else?" said Müller roughly, as he left the verandah, and went within.

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CHAPTER XLIII.

"A STRUGGLE."

THE girl sat there after he had left her—her hands clasped on her knee, her eyes wide and strained and sorrowful, fixed on the dull green of the distant trees. The heavy scents of the flowers stole in on the faint sultry breeze. The birds' notes were hushed, the stillness was intense, and would have been as peaceful as its intensity, but for the pain that lay at her heart and sent its sting through the vague recurring thoughts that filled her brain.

Had she erred? had she been bold and unwomanly in that she had so readily confessed her love and fled to her lover? Was she adding to his troubles and injuring his future by her presence? By the light that Müller's words threw on their actions, it seemed to be so.

True, God made hearts; but man made the laws that ruled them—and those laws she had utterly disregarded; she loved him so deeply, so utterly, so entirely that she had not given a thought to anything else but that love. She was absolutely content with the knowledge that he was near her, and that every day brought with it the joy of his presence. On that joy she could have lived and asked no other gift or good of Fate. But what did Müller mean when he said that the fact of her being here, under his roof, might be prejudicial both to her love and herself?

She went over again the details of that hateful story learnt from Paul's own lips.

Somehow she had never seemed to recognize the woman who had been almost his murderess as his wife, as having a legal claim or right to him, that could hold them apart for long and bitter years.

Paul had spoken so lightly, so coldly of that claim—had seemed to think it would be so easy to strike off those fetters, and yet now they threatened to hold him forcibly.

He had said that the moment he was free they should be wedded. But he was not free, and to-day, for the first time, she found herself facing the question as to what that freedom meant.

She had never read the Marriage Service, but some faint, misty memory was in her mind of words that said, "What God hath joined, let no man put asunder." Yet, according to Paul,

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man was able to put asunder husband and wife, and according to Müller not love, but *law* sanctified their union and kept them true to plighted vows, and this—freedom—that was to give Paul to her—what was it, she wondered, and was she doing right to accept it? There was no one to ask or to advise her, and her brain ached with the bewilderment of these new thoughts. Right—wrong—there they came back again—the old hateful, puzzling words. Right meant duty, and one phase of duty meant obedience to parents; but her parents would have sold her into a dishonourable bondage, and have done it, too, by a cruel and shameless trick. Was she undutiful because she had saved herself? Right or wrong? Well, there seemed no question of wrong in a love so pure and heart-whole and undivided as the love she felt for Paul Meredith.

Love—to a woman—is a “liberal education,” and will teach her in an hour what days and years of a loveless philosophy could never accomplish.

Of late, existence had looked to her so full of beautiful possibilities that she had told herself, “At last I shall be happy.” Now, it suddenly seemed as if happiness was once more drifting into a debatable land, thick-set with the thorns and briars of doubt and tempting.

Yet what could she do? She had thrown in her lot with these friends she had found in that awful time of desperation. But for one unlucky chance she might now have been Meredith’s wife—nothing could have parted or come between them.

His wife. As she said the words to herself a sudden light seemed to flash into her mind. His *wife*—how could that be? a man cannot have two wives, and Paul’s wife was this woman who seemed to have sprung out of silence and darkness to part them both. Of what had she been dreaming so long? What did that freedom mean of which Paul had spoken?

The law had bound them—the law could set them free . . . and yet these words were whispering to her heart with sickening reiteration: “What God hath joined, let no man put asunder.”

She sprang to her feet, white and sick and terrified. At last she saw—at last! She knew that had he been aware of this woman’s existence he would never have asked her to come to him. In common honour he could not have done so. He had deemed himself quite free, and she had believed the same, and now a great and terrible barrier had arisen between them. She had no right to live under his roof—no claim even on his love, while the other lived and bore his name and, for aught she knew, might be able to take him from her even now.



This was what Müller meant. This must have been what he was endeavouring to convey when he spoke of complications—the fact of her living under Paul's roof and protection being already known and placed to his discredit.

She thought of those happy months—the peace, the delight, the perfect unquestioning bliss that had wrapped her in its blind content; nothing—not one whisper of doubt had intruded on her passive acceptance of it all; and yet, for the first time, she began to ask herself, "Was it wrong; and had Paul known it?" She started from her chair as if the thought had stung her into sudden life. She looked around as one startled into wakefulness after some vivid or beautiful dream, might look.

Her mind was trying to disentangle itself from a confused web of memories, incidents, facts; and to grasp from among them one truth, terrible alike in its pain and disenchantment.

It was not of worldly reasoning, of moral arguments, of prudence or self-restraint that she thought now. Her love had been to her the only law she had desired to follow—but then that love had looked pure, sinless, unblamable till a few moments ago. Now what had chanced; what had come to her?

She could not tell as yet; she was only conscious of pain and bewilderment, only capable of recognizing that she had given way to feelings which had needed restraint, and faced her now with accusations of blind selfishness, and blinder passion which had been her own wilful choice.

In an agony of shame and terror she covered her face with her hands and sank back on the chair. "Oh, Paul—Paul!" she cried brokenly. "You might have told—you might have helped me. . . ."

Ere the sob that ended those broken words had died into silence, a hand was laid on her shoulder and the name on which she had called was echoed back: "What should Paul have told you, Sheba—and what is grieving you now?"

Her hands dropped; she lifted her troubled face to his: "Oh, Paul!" she cried brokenly, "I should not be here. Why did you not tell me?"

His face darkened and grew stern. "It has come—at last," he thought. "I—I do not understand you, Sheba," he said aloud; "what do you mean?"

"I mean," said the girl in a low voice that she vainly tried to steady, "that I have heard what the lawyers wrote to you from Melbourne. Ah, Paul! even you will hardly believe me, perhaps, but all this time I never seem to have recognized the fact that this woman is legally your wife—that I have no right, no claim on you;

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and all this time I have been living under your roof . . . and she—she has found it out, and that gives her some equal right to defend herself. Oh! I know I am ignorant and stupid—I don't know about the world or what it says, and I care less; but something . . . something tells me I have done wrong; I ought not to be here—I ought not, perhaps, to have loved you—but that I could not help."

"Sheba!"—so stern, so cold, so strange a voice it was, that for a moment the girl raised her eyes in pained and questioning wonder. "Sheba—what has come to you? Why do you say such words? Do you want to make me *feel* the villain that I look in the eyes of those who know nothing of what led to this?—You knew the story—you knew it in the first hour of my own discovery. You know too that freedom is a mere question of time or legal quibbling. I have a perfect right to it . . . Why do you speak as if it were some new wrong you had discovered?"

"Because," she said sadly, "it seems to be wrong. I cannot tell why or how it has all come to me—but not till an hour ago did I fully realize that this woman is your wife . . . your *wife*, Paul—and that while she lives I have no right to you whatever."

"In God's name, Sheba," he cried passionately, "do not *you* talk such folly. It is the cant of a hypocritical virtue that should have no place in your pure and candid soul. My wife—a murderess—an adulteress—a woman who dishonours the very sex she owns! No—a hundred laws could never make me acknowledge her."

"Tell me one thing, Paul," said the girl gently. "If you had known she lived—would you—that day—when you spoke of love for me first—would you have said what you said then?"

"Why ask such questions?" he said impatiently. "The fact that she was alive could not have altered my love for you . . . but I might not have confessed it."

"And I should not have been—here," said Sheba slowly and with effort. "You see, Paul, what I mean. When one is ignorant, one may err unconsciously, but when one *knows* . . . that alters everything."

"But, dearest," he said more gently than he had yet spoken, "what is the use of bringing up these questions now? We agreed to bear our lives—apart—until the day came when I should be free to make you mine. Have I not explained to you that a woman who deserts her husband for . . . for another man—has no further claim on him? I was too poor to attempt to get justice or freedom for myself when she left me—and afterwards I heard she was dead and was fool enough to believe it. I had made

up my mind never to have anything to do with women again ; as for another marriage . . . it seemed the last thing on earth I should ever desire. How could I tell that my passive acceptance of dishonour would be brought up against me like this? We are such tools of Fate after all ! Still, things are bound to come to a definite conclusion soon. Why need you distress yourself about it in this fashion? Müller had no right to tell you——"

"I think," she said in the same sad, hopeless way, "he told me out of pity for my own ignorance."

He looked at her—the blood dyed his face—his eyes grew dark and defiant. "Do you repent your trust?" he said. "Why should there be any difference now between us?"

"I—don't know," she said, the pain in her eyes growing deeper and more intense as with some inward struggle. "My trust . . . Oh, that has nothing to do with the way in which everything has altered. I suppose I should have loved you, even had I known . . . but I never seemed really to know or realize what I have done till—till just this last hour."

"But what is it?" he asked half fearfully, "that you realize?"

The colour came back to her face—then as suddenly ebbed away; her frank beautiful eyes sank before his gaze. "That I have no right—here," she said. "That my living under your roof has placed us both in a false position and given—her—the right to accuse you of the very infidelity on which you found your own claim for freedom."

He started to his feet. "Curse that meddling German," he muttered passionately. "How dared he tell you that?"

"It was right I should know," the girl said wearily. "I have been blind too long . . . and it was such a foolish, selfish blindness. Who would believe it?—no one—no one."

"Do not speak so sadly," he entreated. "God knows I suffer enough. I told you that one day you would blame me . . . but I did not know it would be so soon."

The wretchedness and hopelessness of his voice went to her heart. "I do not blame you," she said. "It is all my own fault—all. It was I who told you I must leave home. I could not bear the life any longer. You were not to blame because I fled to you as . . . as I did. It was just one of my old mad impulses. My mother always said they would be my ruin."

"But that," he said gently, "is all over and done with. Why go back to it—and why make more evils. You treat this discovery as if it were a new thing ; but it is not ; nothing has altered since that day I had to confess my miserable history to you, and you were so brave and so forgiving."

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"Yes, Paul," she said, "something *has* changed. You spoke lightly of this tie—as something to be easily broken—without right or obligation, but now, you see it is quite different, or there would have been no defence—on *her* part . . . and I . . . you see it is already known that you wish to rid yourself of one woman only to marry another. Oh, it sounds horrible! I—I never knew what it all represented till to-day."

"And knowing it," he said, "what will you do? How does it alter our position?"

She unclasped her hands—she looked from side to side as some trapped creature looks who seeks escape.

"It does alter it," she cried, her voice low and tremulous with agitation. "It alters it because now I see I am acting wrongly, and that my presence is harmful to you."

"No, Sheba," he said, "that is not true."

"I think," she said gravely, "you will find it in the lawyer's letter to you . . . and in any case I *feel* it."

"You cannot love me very much to speak so coldly," he said with angry impatience, because he knew she was speaking the truth and was unable to contradict her.

"It is no question of my love, Paul," she answered gently. "Because nothing can alter that—nothing—even though all our lives we are strangers, or apart."

He started to his feet: "Strangers," he cried stormily; "never use that word to me, Sheba—strangers, you and I—impossible! I have given you all my heart . . . you know it. I thought you at least were strong and true and noble . . . are you going to turn out just like other women when a little trouble or difficulty threatens their love? What did you tell me only last night? you would always say what I wished . . . Well . . . if you love me you must say you will *never* leave me—never—never. Do you hear me, Sheba?"

"Let me think," she entreated. "You are not fair to me, Paul—you carry me beyond my strength; you know that with you I am not mistress of myself—I grow weak and foolish and forgetful—"

"Grow what you will," he interrupted, "but hear me now and—mind—I mean every word I say. Of your own free will you came to me and now—I *mean to keep you*. You promised to throw in your fate with mine—by that promise I hold you until happier times. They will come—only be patient. Why," and he laughed bitterly, "what folly all this is—what has come over us both? You must remain. Where could you go? What could you do? And even if it were a question of waiting twelve

months, or twelve years, nothing worse could be said than has been said of these three months that are past."

"Oh, Paul, is that true?" she cried faintly.

"True—of course it is true. My dearest, don't look so unhappy. Think of last night . . . you can't have forgotten those hours, Sheba? And the future may have many such—if we will."

He dropped into the chair beside her and took her hand. She lifted that sad, perplexed young face to his and its mute suffering smote him to the heart. "I know what you mean," he said hurriedly. "I know that for the first time you realize your position and feel it to be a false one. I would have shielded you from that knowledge had it been possible—but even as it is, what difference can it make? What is the world to us? Why should we care for what it says?"

"Oh," she said. "It is not the world—what is the world when one loves as I love you, Paul?"

"And I only want your love, my dearest. The day for scruples and objections is past and over—our hearts must be our law henceforth. The love I feel for you, Sheba, is sacred to me as any marriage rite. Can you not believe it and trust me still?"

"I have never ceased to trust you," she said brokenly; "but if my love for you is a wrong towards others . . . towards yourself?"

"It is *not*," he cried passionately; "put that idea out of your mind for ever. I deemed myself free, and in a moral and equitable sense I am free. Free to love you—free to taste happiness once more after all these blank and wretched years. I have sworn to give all my present and all my future to you; to be true to you as never man was true. In return, I only ask that between us there shall be no doubt, no question of any other interference, otherwise I shall know you do not love me as I *want* to be loved, as I believed you capable of loving."

The colour flushed her cheeks as she listened to those passionate words. Never before had he spoken as he spoke now. His hand closed on hers—his heart beat so loudly she could hear it in that sultry noonday stillness.

For a moment she could frame no words; her eyes drooped—her lips quivered. A sudden faintness and dreaminess stole over her, lulling to rest the pain and doubts of this last hour. Had not her whole life been a dream of such love—a prayer and cry for it?—and now it was hers . . . hers to hold for all her life to come, hers in the fulness and richness of adoration, and truth, and perfect trust.

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He read the change in her face—he saw the eloquence and glory and passion in those eyes upraised to his for one brief moment—then veiled and hidden by a shy and sudden shame. He bent closer to her and his lips rested on her soft rich hair.

"Why should we deny ourselves happiness?" he said. "Who will thank us—or who will care for what we suffer? I have scarcely dared speak to you, or meet you—or kiss you; and who is the better for my abstinence? I have been patient because freedom seemed so easy and so sure, and now—I am asked to believe in this legal farce that threatens to keep you from me. Ah! my Sheba, turn you face to me again, and believe me when I tell you that in all the few brief years of life we count as ours, there is but one good thing, and that is love—such love as has come to us both. Shall we deny it, refuse it, reject it? Surely we would be worse than fools to do that. Rather let us take all the comfort and all the delight it can give us—hold it as our most precious possession. Life will give us nothing better—nothing half so good."

Her head drooped on his breast, his lips met hers. With that touch the ignorance of childhood left Sheba Ormatroyd for ever. Before her dazzled sight there gleamed the golden apples of temptation, and of knowledge of good and evil.

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CHAPTER XLIV.

"WHEN A STRONGER THAN HE——"

THE strong man armed can keep his house until a stronger than he sets himself to take it. Then—there is but one result possible.

The full force and strength of a mighty passion had lain in wait for possession of Sheba Ormatroyd until she was most weak and most helpless. Then—it swooped with giant force upon her soul and wrapped her round with arms of fire—and was no longer an angel of peace, but a tyrant, fierce and compelling; yet, womanlike she was ready to bend her head and kiss the yoke—to shut her eyes to all and everything around—to float unresisting on the current of a deep and wonderful joy as a tired sleeper whose dreams visit heaven and repay by temporary forgetfulness the woe and misery and weariness of earth. All previous hardships and loneliness and suffering of her life seemed only as far-off memories. She who had never been happy—who had never known love in any shape or form—who had been always misunder-

stood—despised, tyrannized over—she had won such love as the world could but faintly comprehend—as Life could bestow but once . . . and that once was to her as for ever.

It seemed wonderful—incredible, as she thought of it and of his words, and of the long passionate kiss that had sealed the promise of his truth and thrown open the floodgates of a love that, as yet, had hardly found expression.

But that time was over. It would never be again—never—never—never—she whispered to herself with a regret that was half fearful even in its intensity of joy.

Who can describe Love, or gauge its depths and infinite variety? It is as an indefinable influence that seizes body, soul, and spirit and merges them into the being and existence of another; it is the subtle recognition of kindred souls—as the electric flash of the storm-clouds—coming one knows not how, falling one knows not where—but once having fallen, its power cannot be recalled, once recognized there is no longer any possibility of darkness or ignorance in all the after years.

Sheba Ormatroyd had thrown herself on her knees in her dark, cool, little chamber, and with her face buried in her clasped hands she tried to think out, calmly and coolly, the events of this one morning. But calm thought was no longer possible. She could but remember Paul's look and kiss, and her own whispered promise that she would never leave him—never—come what might. She had braved public opinion already. She had gone so far that doubts and scruples looked foolish and cowardly. He loved her as she had always dreamt of love—he needed her, as she needed him. The love of each for the other was grounded in the memory of past years of bitter unhappiness. Life had brought them to each other, and who should say that consolation was impossible or wrong? By the new light that had come to her she began to think of the histories she had read. Of women brave and bold enough to face even worldly condemnation, just for sake of the greatness and strength of love. How many had done it openly and in the light of day—and how many more secretly and undiscovered. What had Pharamond told her of great and gifted women—women who must have been capable of judging as well as feeling? What was the world whispering of its new woman genius who had been content to set its laws and rules at defiance?

Surely one so great—so gifted—so wise—must have counted the cost before taking so bold a step. And she—she was but Sheba Ormatroyd, a friendless unknown girl, whose fate would concern no one, affect no one, save herself.

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fatal interview—where could she go? Who would believe her story? If she went back to her own mother and told her, she knew that she would laugh in her face. As for receiving her, or acknowledging her, Sheba did not need to think twice of the likelihood of such a thing. She seemed to see her mother's face—to hear her step-father's hoarse laugh, and Dolly's mocking gibes. She had run away to evade a marriage which to them was perfectly honourable, and for three months had lived under the roof of a man who already possessed a wife—and who only at this late hour was endeavouring to evade the legal responsibilities of that possession. In plain words that was how the world would look at her position; and experience told her that in that world she would find no judge so harsh—no condemnation so cruel as that of her own mother. She thought of the Saxtons. But she did not know now where they were, and how could she expect even gentle Aunt Allison to extenuate her foolish conduct, or believe in her innocence.

No . . . . plainly enough there was no help for her. Paul had said so, and Paul was the law and ruler of her life. She had said she would trust him, and he had told her that she should never repent such trust. Then why struggle any longer against the strength of his will—the will that was to her as Fate and to which she felt herself yielding as the tired swimmer yields to the current?

She raised her head, and gazed upwards and around as if seeking counsel. For long she had not prayed. For long she had listened with eager thirsty ears to all the bewildering philosophies that were as familiar as the air he breathed, to Müller. The old childish faiths had fallen from her like a mantle. Now a subtle, dangerous fire seemed stealing through her veins. Paul had said, "Let us be a law unto ourselves;" and, alas! her own heart echoed those words with a gladness that almost terrified her. Why should she leave him? Why should she cut herself adrift from the only joy that had ever gladdened her life of harsh repression? No one would suffer because of her actions, for no one cared enough for her to question those actions—no one but Paul; and for Paul henceforth she would live, and in Paul's truth she would trust; and Paul should be her law, even as he was her love, and all her hopes of happiness and all her dreams of greatness might lapse into the sweet and passion-filled ecstasy that his presence alone could bestow.

She rose from her knees. No warning voice chilled her newborn joy. No whisper of prudence, or of wrong, echoed at the passionate portals of her heart.





That night again they met in those great and beautiful solitudes of Nature. They met and spoke as only hearts speak when all barriers are broken down, and all disguise impossible. The calm soft eyes of the starlit heavens were the sole witnesses of the love that bound them to each other. The voice of Nature—hushed and tranquil as the midnight stillness—the only voice that breathed out any blessing, or prayer of consecration. Heart to heart, soul to soul they stood, trembling and half fearful of the intense and passionate love that, freed from all restraint, spoke out at last its mutual idolatry.

It seemed as if a god had descended and held out to them a gift so wonderful and beautiful that they scarce dared take it, but even as he laid it at their feet he whispered in their ears, "Ye are but sleepers, blind and dumb, yet so long as ye sleep shall love seem true and beautiful and abiding. But your hour of waking shall surely come; yea—surely as your hour of death!"

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## CHAPTER XLV.

### "IF DREAMS COULD LAST."

A YEAR had passed.

A year of changing seasons—of tropical storms—of rains and floods—of seedtime and harvests. It had brought many changes, for Time marched with quick step in the youth of the Australian colonies. Progress was alert and busy, not weighted and slow of movement. To plan and to act were almost simultaneous in impulse, and Nature was ever ready to lend kindly aid to man's enterprise and skill. Melbourne was a populous and beautiful city, though wanting the picturesque situation and lovely surroundings of its sister of Sydney. Wealth, ambition and self-confidence were at work in the broad streets, and public offices, and gay and glittering shops. Enterprise was at its height and seldom failed to grasp the prize it desired. Brains and handicraft found a ready mart. Money was plentiful, and labour received even more than its adequate value.

A year had passed since Sheba Ormatroyd had stood hand in hand with her lover beneath the midnight stars and vowed that his love should be her law. A year had passed since Mrs. Levison had awakened to the fact that her will was not absolute; since her daughter had fled from her roof; since Bessie Saxton had married Pharamond. Mr. Levison had attained his ambition

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and was now in Parliament. Dolly went to a fashionable and expensive school. Hex was neither better nor worse than the average youth of colonial towns, except in the matter of idleness and self-indulgence, virtues in which he excelled and in the furtherance of which his foolish and blindly adoring mother helped considerably to aid him.

Sheba's name was never mentioned in that home circle. Even the brother with whom she had played as a child and whom she had loved so warmly, scarcely ever gave a thought to her memory. The family verdict had been passed on her conduct and never recalled. She "had made a fool of herself," in their candid parlance, and having done so they unanimously turned their backs on her and professed to care no longer for her future, or what she might make of it. They considered her "a disgrace," and as such were only too ready to wipe her very memory off their minds as a finished or useless sum might be wiped off a slate. The Opera Company that had worked all these grievous disasters had returned to England. They naturally supposed Sheba had gone also.

But Meredith had not returned with the company. The tenor, Riola, had recovered and taken his old place. Paul had chosen to remain in Melbourne, where he gave singing-lessons at half-a-guinea a lesson to the daughters of the city magnates, and was the star of all the public concerts and entertainments given there. It was not a life he liked or desired, but until his case was decided he had determined to stay in Melbourne and therefore turned his talents to their best account, as did Franz Müller also.

The old German and little Paul and Sheba Ormatroyd lived in a small wooden house of one storey, standing on an elevated plateau about a mile distant from the town itself. Paul Meredith did not live with them, but came two or three times a week, as his leisure allowed, and always on Sunday.

The little house was to him a paradise of rest and beauty. It stood amidst the shade of giant eucalyptus trees; the trellised front of the verandah was festooned with bongainvilleas and passion-flowers; the garden edged with purple tamarisk and rose thickets, and bright with oleanders and scarlet geraniums.

For a year this had been Sheba Ormatroyd's home. A year that had passed like a dream of delight; in whose charmed days her soul lay rocked to slumber; a year of deep sweet restfulness which had wrapped her in a trance of joy more exquisite than any fancy had pictured. Nothing had disturbed or intruded on that peaceful home; no rude breath, no prying gaze, no worldly wisdom. The depth and tenderness of an infinite love had

sheltered her from every blast, protected her from every care, was around her and about her like the sunlight and the air, and seemed to breathe a charm around the little dwelling that kept such things as sorrow or misfortune far away.

A year. One whole good glad year of pure, full-toned joy. Well, such years are rare enough. One should take them thankfully and reverently, and with fear, when they do come, and so Sheba took hers. Trembling, mute, and half afraid of the deep, deep joy it brought, and seeing in Love still the Angel of Dreams who holds all heaven in that magic sleep which for one brief moment is granted to mortal eyes; a year, not of idleness, for heart and mind had alike found food, and she had grown in mental stature as in physical beauty; a year of full busy hours, and of rest the sweeter for the labour that brought it; a year that had seen her childish dreams almost realized and proved that she was capable of work that might in time claim the world's attention and win for her that coveted wreath of Fame which never seems valueless till—attained.

Her book had been published in Melbourne by a firm who had also a London house, and had met with astonishing success. She had now regular journalistic work for one of the leading papers, and this kept her well employed in the time when she was not teaching little Paul, and served to render still more enchanting those brief charmed hours when her lover's presence brought her holiday and idleness.

In those days the arena of literature was not crowded with female aspirants as now, and work was easier to obtain and better paid. Now female recruits in the army of labour rush into all its ranks and grades, and rally round every profession and almost every trade. Now we rejoice in an age that has created the penny dreadful, and the weekly sensational, the romantic, the impossible, the realistic, the illiterate, the useless, and various other styles of literature, in all of which the female brain is prolific, and the female hand pre-eminent. The underpaid governess, the extravagant schoolgirl, the dressmaker's apprentice, the daughter who lacks pocket-money, and the daughter who does *not*—all these fly to fiction as a means of eking out a livelihood, or making one if they are lucky. Even nursemaids have been bold enough to try their 'prentice hands at story writing, besides another class who shall be nameless, and are ready and willing to give their productions for no remuneration save the honour and glory of seeing themselves in print—a glory for which they have even been known to *pay*! If it were for the benefit or the suppression of this latter class that the office of critic had been

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established, one might allow it *had* a use, which is sometimes a doubtful question among authors.

But Sheba Ormatroyd had not the honour of struggling for a place amidst this crowd of aspirants; and her own gifts and Müller's careful supervision and kindly criticism speedily won her success. She loved her work too ardently and enthusiastically to be easily satisfied with what she accomplished; but that element of dissatisfaction is in itself a help to effort, and prevents author and artist alike from sinking into carelessness or content—two of the worst foes genius has to combat.

How happy that year had been, defies all words to paint.

It was an ideal life—the life of all others suited to the girl's temperament and nature.

The change in her was almost marvellous—as great a change as day brings to the silver greyness of the dawn, as the sun pours over a world of shadow and of gloom. It was a change in face, stature, form—nay, in every movement. The glow in her eyes, the soft colour in her face, the happy smile of the mouth, the dreamful tenderness of expression—how can words describe them!

To Meredith she seemed more lovely every time he saw her; but he was wiser than most lovers, in that he did not see her too often, for he was determined that no breath of satiety should dim the glory of their passion—it was to be the rest and beauty of their lives, not the burdened associate.

So still they had their charmed hours, their days of sweet "do nothing," and still they kept the poety and beauty of their love sheltered and apart from scorn or knowledge of the world beyond those rose-set hedges.

Müller never interfered with them now. They were free to wander off where and when they pleased—to spend sweet dreamy, idle hours together under the shade of the garden trees, or the glory of the summer nights. Love was still absorbing and still divine. For them the outer world had no existence in those hours. Thoughts, hopes, desires, dreams—all hovered round each other and seemed as things holy and apart, which love had consecrated and time but made more beautiful. The daily life, the work and ambitions it brought were things out of sight and afar. Peace, security, serenity, the isolation of a great and intense passion—these alone were admitted into thought or word—these still guarded the gates of their paradise.

"Two love, and one tires," says a proverb; but there was no question of tiring here, for the love was equal—and as yet unsullied by one thought of shame, one touch of regret. Sheba

never felt the need of other companionship than was contained within the walls of that small wooden house. Those of her own sex with whom she had associated had never been of a kind to make her desire further acquaintance. There was no woman who would have understood her, or sympathized with her, save perhaps Allison Saxton, and of her she had heard nothing since they had last parted in Sydney.

So this year had passed in unbroken tranquillity, and when one looks out on life and sees how brief are its allowances of happiness, a year seems a great deal. It was scarcely, however, to be expected that it should repeat itself. No such thing as continuous joy is possible in this world, whatever may be the rule in another. So the white-winged angel of peace received orders forthwith, and in his place came a stern and gloomy form, armed with a sword which, with the inevitable justice of fate, was destined to pierce the weakest heart, and most defenceless life, of that doomed household.

It was on one sultry summer evening that the blow fell—fell without warning or premonition. It chanced that on this special evening Paul Meredith had driven over to the little house in his light buggy. They had not expected him, and Sheba had gone down to the Yarra valley with little Paul. Müller was sitting in the verandah, smoking as usual. He was attired in an airy costume of grey alpaca; before him was a table containing fruit, wine and iced water, and a low bamboo lounge by his side was littered with books and music.

"*Lieber Himmel!*" he cried, taking out his pipe and surveying Paul with astonishment. "What brings you here to-night, *mein Freund?* We did not expect—oh, you need not look, she is not here; she went down to the river for a breath of air . . . I trust she may find it. Myself—I like to keep still and smoke off the mosquitoes. That is the best way to cool oneself—*nicht wahr?*"

"No doubt," said Paul, seating himself also. "Well, because the mail is in for one thing, and I thought the papers would amuse you all; and because in passing Wilson's, I looked in and found a note for Sheba. It is addressed to 'The Author of "Damaris."' I thought Sheba would like to have it. I suppose it is from some one who has read the book."

"No doubt," said Müller. "Well, you had best wait till she returns—I suppose that won't be very long, as the boy is with her. Open your papers and let us hear the news of the old country. Begin with the *Times*—births, deaths, marriages . . . Why, Paul, what is it?"

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He was staring aghast and amazed at the ashy face before him. Paul could not speak for a minute. His eyes were fastened on one line of the column at which he had carelessly glanced on opening the paper . . . . His face had grown white as death . . . . "Good God!" he cried below his breath; "look there, Müller, in the obituary list . . . . there, man—the third and fourth names!"

Müller took the paper from his trembling hands. He saw the deaths announced of Viscount Dormer, eldest son, and Lord Arthur Herbert, second son, of the Earl of Annesley, at his residence, Castle Annesley, near Durham. The two young men had died of typhoid fever within two days of each other.

"Well!" he said, as he handed back the paper; "what are they to you that you so distress yourself? Relatives—friends, eh?"

"They are my brothers," answered Paul in a strange husky voice. "The earl is my father. He had four sons . . . . The youngest died as an infant—I was the third—now don't you see what it means? These two stood between me and the title. My eldest brother was just going to be married . . . I—I can't believe it, Müller . . . . I had quarrelled with my father . . . . He swore he would never receive me again, and now I—I——"

"Precisely," said the old German, quite unmoved by the announcement. "It is only the irony of Fate . . . she exemplifies herself once more. You, the discarded, the despised, are the future earl. That is just what one might expect. Do you wish me to congratulate you?"

"Congratulate me. Good God! Don't you see the difficulties, the complications? I may have to go back to England. There is the child . . . . see how it alters his position . . . . and Sheba——"

"What of her?" asked Müller sharply, struck by something in the young man's tone.

His head drooped on his hands. "Oh, God!" he cried hoarsely; "that I were free—that I were free."

The old German laid his pipe down on the table, and deliberately surveyed him.

"Paul," he said, "what do you mean? There is remorse in your voice . . . . Free, of course you will be free. It is only a question of time. That artful hussey has been clever enough to secure the best lawyer in Melbourne, and your funds did not allow of extensive outlay, otherwise your case would have been settled long ago."

"Yes," cried Paul, starting to his feet and pacing to and fro

the verandah in a distraught fashion. "But it comes on next month. If I don't win it—if judgment goes against me.—Oh, heavens! Müller, how can I tell you? Have you been blind? Can't you guess? In four months' time Sheba will be a mother."

Müller sprang from his chair, his eyes blazing with wrath, a fierce oath hissed through his clenched teeth. "So—Paul Meredith, *this* is your honour! And I—trusted you!"

"Stay, Müller, hear me!" cried the young man miserably. "You know I would have married her long ago if it had been possible. As it is, the moment I am free she shall be my wife. In God's name, man, don't look at me like that. I love her beyond and above everything this world holds."

"You—love her," cried the old man slowly and distinctly. "You love her . . . and see what you have made of her life. You will be called back to your native land, to honours, rank, wealth; and—she, what place can you give there to your mistress and your illegitimate child? Answer me that! Ah! you shudder! the words are coarse, they hurt you, but they are true—true, do you hear, and all the world will say them! A secret like this is just the very secret that you can never hide. Do you suppose that *that* woman does not know—that she would not—for revenge—tell out the history of your actions *here*? Do you think there is one of your fine friends over there in that land of your birth, who would receive Sheba Ormatroyd as your wife, knowing that she was first your mistress?"

"Oh, hush," cried Paul in agonized entreaty—but the entreaty came too late. In the doorway behind Müller stood Sheba herself. She had caught the sound of her own name. She had heard those last cruel words. She saw that one face of anger and disgust, and that other of pain and love and anguish, turned towards her. She saw, and a scorching flush as of some suddenly revealed shame stained her white uplifted face. Then brokenly she cried, "Oh, Paul—Paul!" and fled to him, and hid her face on his breast, trembling and weeping like a child.

That sight smote Müller to the heart. She so brave, and queenly, and beautiful, the girl of whose gifts and intellect and purity he had been so proud—she to shrink from his gaze, and hide her face from sight as if her secret were branded there for every eye to read.

Wrath and pain made him savage. How could he have been so blind—how dreamt that the patience which age and philosophy had brought to him was possible to one in whose pulses the vein of life was keen and potent? Love holds a Tantalus cup—not a soothing draught. Had he not himself said hearts were

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treacherous, and the voice of nature stronger than that of prudence; but though he had said it, he had believed in Paul, and as for Sheba, no goddess of marble could have seemed to him more pure and cold and stately . . . and after all . . . after all. He was not harsh enough, or pitiless enough, to hurl at her the bitter truths that moralists love. That one look at her changed face, the sight of that mute shamed gesture with which she hid her eyes on the breast of the man who had wronged her, smote him to the heart.

He turned away. He felt he dared not trust himself to speak. Paul had wronged her. Paul must console her—if it were possible now that she had learnt the truth.

He felt instinctively that she had never realized or recognized it, until those harsh coarse words from his own lips had taught it her. He would have recalled them had it been possible, but it was too late. The bandage had fallen from her eyes at last. For the future—his brow grew dark as he thought of it. What could the future be to her now, since fate never allowed the crooked path to become straight again, or brought one single wished-for gift to a human life until it had ceased to need, or desire it?

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CHAPTER XLVI.

"NOT SINGLE SPIES—BUT IN BATTALIONS."

PAUL swept aside the books and papers from the low bamboo lounge, and drew Sheba down beside him there.

"Dearest," he whispered entreatingly, "you must not grieve. Müller is naturally angry because he thinks we have deceived him. No third person can ever comprehend what we two are to one another. They judge us by commonplace rules and standards."

"What did he mean?" she said hoarsely. "He spoke of England . . . You are not going there, Paul . . . not going to leave me—*now*?"

"I will never leave you, Sheba," he said solemnly. "You might know that. But something has happened, dear, that alters all my prospects in life. I find by the English papers that my two brothers are dead. I—I never told you who I really was. There seemed so little likelihood that I should ever be anything but plain Paul Meredith, but now, owing to these deaths, I stand next heir to an earldom in England, and my father, the present earl, is seventy-six years of age. So, dearest, it might chance



that I have to go there some day. But not now, not perhaps for years, and long before then you will be my own lawful wife. Would to God you were so now at this moment."

"Müller said, 'Who in that land would receive me as your wife knowing I had been your mistress,'" said the girl, lifting her white face from his breast. "Is that true, Paul? For I know nothing—nothing of what the world says—only that I loved you and trusted you."

All the soft colour had left her face. Her eyes were full of pain and fear. The bolt had fallen into her paradise at last, and with it had come knowledge and shame. Never again could she sink into the blind sweet trance of this past year, never again follow with closed and happy eyes the flowery path where love had set her feet.

"It is not—true," he said passionately. "They shall never know—who but ourselves is aware of the secret? Müller would never betray it. When once this case of mine is settled I will wed you at once with all due legal form and ceremony. Ah, my Sheba, how you have talked and longed for a sight of the old country, and now it is feasible and probable. How glorious it will be to show you my house and possessions. Such a beautiful old place the castle is, Sheba, and what a lovely stately countess you will make, my darling. Not one of my ancestors can show a bride worthy to vie with my beautiful Australian flower."

He drew her close to him with a sudden passionate impulse, but she gave a little cry, and his arms relaxed their hold. She was so white, he feared she was about to faint. "What is it?" he cried alarmed. "Did I hurt you?" Their eyes met. He saw a hot flush dye her cheek. She was trembling greatly.

"Oh, Paul! Paul!" she cried. "It is all changed—it is all different—we can never be the same to each other any more. It is not possible. The world will not allow it. It was so easy to say we would be a law to ourselves . . . but now . . . it all looks so different . . . and I . . . do you think I did not see in Müller's face what men will think of me . . . to what coarse interpretation my actions lend themselves; and yet God knows I loved you so utterly, so blindly, there was no thought of wrongdoing. Oh, why did you not let me go that day when first I learnt my true position? I ought not to have remained. I felt it, then. I feel it doubly now."

"Can you look back on this year," he said, "and ask that question? Have we not tasted such happiness as is given to few mortals ever to know? What could the world have given us in place of it?"

"Not the world," she said, "but our own hearts' approval——"

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"We should have been miserable," he said; "I could not have borne to lose you, Sheba. Perhaps it was that fear which led me into deeper wrong. . . . But why talk of it? You are mine and I am yours till death parts us. . . . Now put off that sad face; I cannot bear that you should reproach me. See, here are the letters that the mail brought; I haven't looked at them yet; one from the London publishers for you. . . . Oh, that reminds me, I called in at Wilson's this afternoon and found this letter; it bears the Sydney post-mark—addressed to the author of 'Damaris.' Perhaps it is an offer for another book."

She took the letter from his hand and glanced at the direction. He saw her start. "It is from Noel Hill," she cried breathlessly. "How has he found out my secret?"

The book had been published under an assumed name. Wonderingly, she tore open the envelope and read how he had fathomed the secret of its authorship.

"Dear madam," it began, "I may of course be mistaken, but in reading the book 'Damaris,' I seemed to recognize the style and workmanship of an old pupil of mine, Sheba Ormatroyd. I have lost sight of her for nearly eighteen months, and was under the impression she had married and gone to England. If I am mistaken, pray forgive me; if *not*, let me assure Sheba Ormatroyd that her old friend and teacher Noel Hill, is most anxious for news of her welfare, and begs her to give him the assurance of her happiness and health. Should the writer of this note be addressing a stranger, he begs to apologize, and to plead as his excuse, sincere admiration for the literary workmanship of her admirable novel."

Paul had read the note with Sheba. At its conclusion they turned and looked at each other. The girl's face was pale and frightened.

"Sydney is so near," she cried suddenly, "and if he hears I did write the book. . . . that I am living here. . . . he may come to see me, and oh, what would he think? what would he say? He is so good; he was always so kind to me, and I could not tell him a lie. And he is a clergyman, you know——"

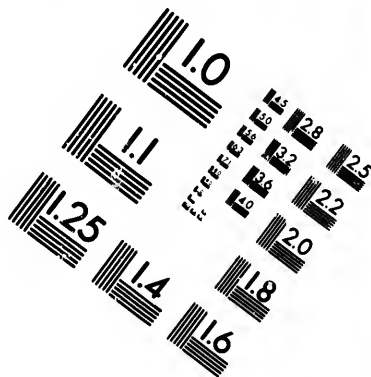
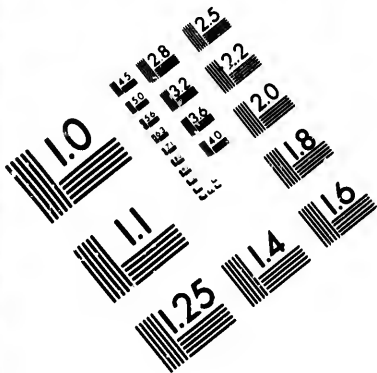
"Yes, I know," said Paul. "But why should he come here? You need not give him your address, or you can say you are just about to sail for England."

Her eyes fell on the familiar writing. She seemed to see that young pale earnest face—to look back once more into the serious kindly eyes of Noel Hill.

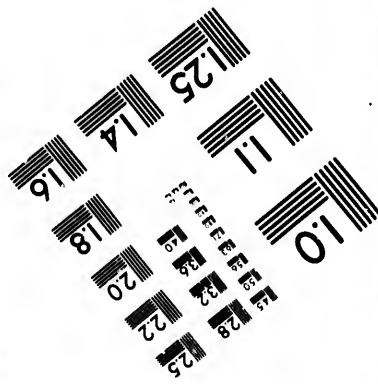
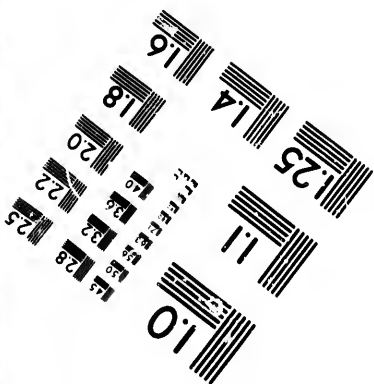
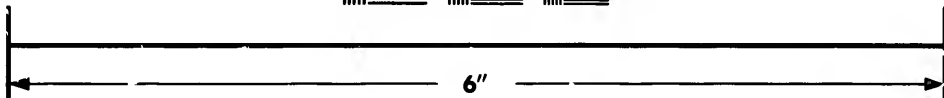
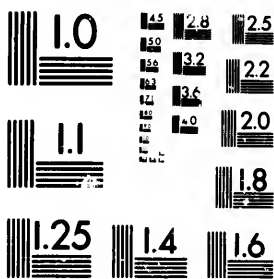
"I could not write to him," she said, "and not speak the truth. Perhaps I had better not write at all."

"You must please yourself about that," said Meredith coldly.





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He was not at all pleased with this intrusion. He disliked clergymen nearly as much as Müller did, and he had no desire to have one intimate with Sheba, and speaking out clerical views of morality in her ears. The change in his voice struck the girl's keen perception. She looked up at his clouded face.

"Are you vexed about this, Paul?" she said. "You need not be. I will not write to him, and he will suppose he has made a mistake. Still"—and the shy, warm colour stole back to her face—"still, I am so pleased he liked my book; he is so clever and so well-read, his opinion is worth a great deal."

"It would be difficult for any one not to like that book," said Paul gently; "you have real genius, my dearest, and the world will be at your feet one day."

"As if I cared for that," she said, looking back into his eyes, "so long as I have your praise, and your love."

"You know you will have my love till the last hour of my life," he said passionately. "Oh, God! that I were not such a chained galley slave; that I were free to give you that honour in the world's sight, which you have in mine."

Her eyes drooped. "It is not for myself," she said faintly; "but I never thought, I never guessed, what wrong I might do to another life. Oh, to think, Paul, that however we might keep our secret from the world's knowledge, however dear or faithful we are to each other, a day may come when our own child will have it in its power to upbraid us, to curse me—its mother."

"Hush, for God's sake," cried Meredith stormily. "Such a day may never come. I have wealth now at my disposal and can set those cumbersome legal machines going at a different speed. The moment the courts meet, the case will come on. There is still time, you see. I—I am to blame I know. I should have considered such a possibility. Still we need not look on the gloomy side of the subject, dear one; the day must come at last when I am free, and then——"

He stooped and kissed her lips under the shade of the falling darkness, and for a moment she clung to him mutely, sorrowfully, as if he were indeed her only shield and protector now.

Then she drew herself away, and folded Noel Hill's letter into its cover once more.

"You have not read yours, Paul," she said, glancing at the packet on the table.

"They are from the English lawyers," he said. "I told them to address me at Melbourne when I left home. I suppose it is only the announcement of those poor fellows' deaths."

He moved away from her side to where the light fell, and care-

lessly opened one of the letters. He read it through quite silently, though his face grew pale as death. Sheba still lay back on the low bamboo lounge, her eyes fixed on the folded sheets that contained Noel Hill's message. For a moment she had forgotten Paul.

Presently the rustling of the paper made her look up. She read a change in his face, and in a moment was beside him. "What is it?" she cried. "More troubles? Oh, Paul—Paul!"

"My father," he cried hoarsely. "Oh, Sheba, what can I do? what ought I to do? He is ill—dying they say. His one cry is for me, his only son; he always loved me so, and we parted in bitter anger; and he forgives me, he needs me. Oh, child, this is cruel to you. One blow follows another, and yet—and yet——"

"You ought to go," she said in a strange cold voice, unlike her own. "Yes, Paul, you ought to go. I have lost my father too. Oh, what I would have given to hear one last word from him! He was so good to me always; he loved me, I know, and then . . . he died quite suddenly without one farewell word, and this is worse . . . for you parted in anger."

"Yes," he said, "and it was my fault. Poor father; he prophesied I should repent. God! if he could see me now."

"I always had roving blood in my veins," he went on presently, forgetful for a moment of the girl who stood beside him in the patience of pain and endurance. "I was restless, passionate, wilful. I never thought I should be wanted at home. It seemed out of all probability, so I took my own way and came out here, and all these years I have heard nothing, save just some business communication from the lawyer; and now . . . my dearest, it is too hard. I cannot leave you."

"And I cannot go with you," she said mournfully; "you must leave me, Paul. Your father has a greater claim than I."

"If I go," he said hesitatingly, "I ought to take Paul. You know what all this means for him."

"Yes," she said, and shivered as if with sudden cold. How those words brought before her the difference. The child born in wedlock, even though his mother was so vile a creature, would have honour, name and rights that her child could never possess. For the first time her heart seemed to grow pitiful and yearning towards that unborn, nameless thing to which her sin would give life, whose feeble existence would have its first claim on herself. For the first time she realized that, though her love was pure and holy, and great beyond all power of expression, it had held some claim on her womanhood which she had disregarded.

A man might do what he chose. A woman could not. She had always to consider the fate of others, to whom she might make

life a shame or a glory, in whose power she placed the right to condemn or justify herself. And this was what she had done. She had never regretted it—never looked upon it as a sacrifice till this hour; but now she could never be blind again—never—never, far as the years might roll.

It would be no use to tell herself other women had done the same, and the world had thought, or seemed to think, none the worse of them. The greatest genius could not extenuate a sin; the most subtle reasoning could not make wrong—right.

Suddenly, without warning, without preparation, the veil was rent from her eyes. That look of Müller's was the first look that had taught her the meaning of shame. If he, who loved her so dearly, could condemn her thus, what would the world's verdict be? The world that Paul had dreamed she could face as his wife—his wife, while yet those harsh and hateful words rang in her ears, "They will say you have married your mistress."

"Sheba," said Paul's voice beside her, "dearest, where are your thoughts? I have called you twice."

She started, and turned her beautiful sad eyes to the face she had loved so well, ay, loved to her own undoing. "What is it?" she said wearily. "Any new misfortune. I seem to realize what Job felt when one messenger of ill arrived on the heels of another"

"You may well say that," he answered. "I asked you if you thought you could risk the voyage, supposing I left at once."

She shuddered away from his encircling arm. "Oh, no!" she cried, "I could not. How can you ask, Paul? It is not only myself; but how could I go to your own land, your own home, with this uncertainty still hanging over my head? And supposing the case goes against you, after all?"

"It cannot," he cried stormily. "It is impossible, the evidence is too plain."

"You cannot tell that," she said sadly. "No, Paul, I will remain here; but you must go; there is no help for it."

"How can I go?" he cried bitterly. "How can I leave you now, just when you need all my care, all my love? No, I cannot go, Sheba; not yet, not until you are safe and well once more."

"And meanwhile," she said unsteadily, "your father may die."

He almost groaned as he turned aside and leant against one of the slender flower-wreathed pillars of the verandah. "Was ever man so tortured?" he cried desperately. "What is to be done?"

"I have told you," the girl said, trying to speak coldly and calmly for all the pain and terror at her heart. "You must go. I will remain here. Perhaps Müller will forgive me when he knows all, and how I suffer——"



"Müller has nothing to forgive you, *mein Fräulein*. Ach, he was a brute and a fool just now. Do not think of it. He asks your pardon . . . He will be your friend, your father still. Yes, come to me; weep your fill—that is a woman's comfort. Nay, Paul, you need not be jealous of these old arms. I was harsh and unjust just now. I forgot how much I too am to blame with my cold, hard, damned philosophies. I took all away from her, poor child—her simple faiths, her clinging irrational hopes. Foolish they may be—and are; but they are a woman's salvation. And I reduced everything to bare fact and reason, and the guidance of individual brains, and this—is the result. I wanted her to love art, and to seek knowledge; but how can a female thing live on this earth without love? and once she loves what does she care for all the wisdom, and all the power, and all the glory of earth? Nothing, nothing at all. Nay, let her weep, Paul. We are all friends once more. . . . it will do her good. I am only her rough old Müller, but I will care for her, do not you fear. And now let us be calm and rational, and talk over all that has happened. If you must go to England, she shall stay with me. I will take of her every care; she shall be safe and well and write another wonderful book—is it not so, *meine Liebe*? There, look up and smile once more; life is too short for quarrels. Come, Paul, sit down here, and let us talk. For me I will smoke and advise. I know you are both naughty children, but I forgive; only you must have no secrets from your old Müller—never any more—mind, I tell it you—never any more."

"Never any more," said Paul huskily, as he drew Sheba to his side; "but, oh, Müller, how can I leave her? It will break my heart."

"Pooh," scoffed the old German, "break your heart! Did one ever hear such stuff; as if hearts break so easily. Be not a fool, my dear Paul. Your heart will not break—no; nor that of my clever beautiful *Fräulein* either; old Müller will see to that. Parting—well, it is a little hard, I know. You are like two children—scarce out of leadings-strings yet; a toothache, or a cut finger, they scare you so, you think to die. Bah! you will not die of the pain or the scare. Get it over quick—sharp; that is my advice. Then afterwards—so much the greater the joy and the relief."

But though he talked on so cheerfully his heart was bitter within him, and always he seemed to see a pale proud face dyed red with the scorch of shame, and a queenly head hidden in sudden awakened terror, at the scathing rebuke of an honest condemnation.

Always he saw that, and his heart ached as it had never ached for any living thing, and there seemed to him something tragic and terrible about this lonely girl, who had known no love till love came disguised in a beauty that had only wrought evil in her life, and yet had drawn that life and all its innocence and genius to its keeping, without regret, without pity, without remorse.

It was but an old story repeated. The story that the world knows by heart, yet repeats and repeats till one would think the iteration was but a wearisome chorus, tuneless and dull, and with never a ring of melody in the familiar notes.

Such an old, old, story. But to think that Sheba's lips should tell it. To think of the many foolish, careless, useless lives in the world without, and that this one should be wrecked and ruined for sake of a man's selfish and exacting passion. She could never be the same to him again—never, or to any man who knew. That is man's strange way of visiting offences, or at least that *one* offence to which they lend all their art and skill of tempting, and then most bitterly condemn.

And Müller was afraid of Paul, well as he knew him; afraid of this sudden change of fortune, of the effects of the old familiar life, the luxury and beauty, the exactions of rank and honour. Yes, he was afraid and doubtful, for all he talked so bravely and cheerfully. He knew the world so well, and the worth of love, of any man's love who has gained all that a woman can bestow, and makes her very generosity the excuse for condemnation, when the fire of passion gives place to the convenience of morality.

He knew it all in every grade and phase of the sad old Faust story, and, knowing it, he felt his heart ache with sudden strange foreboding over the fate of this girl, whom he loved as he had never loved a human creature in all the hard and toilful years of his own strange, tangled life.

"If I believed in prayers to a God, or a Heaven," he muttered to himself, as he looked at the two sitting so pale and silent in the clear sweet moonlight, "I should feel inclined to pray their care for her. She will need it ere many months are past."

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## CHAPTER XLVII.

### THE SHRINE OF "HE."

A WEEK later Paul Meredith sailed for England, taking the child with him. As long as he was with her or near her, Sheba kept

her grief and suffering out of sight. She would not let him see what the mere thought of that parting was to her. Sometimes when he looked at the quiet face, or watched the busy fingers preparing little Paul's outfit, Meredith said to himself that she could not feel it so much after all. He did all he could to cheer her.

"I am going by steamer," he said. "That will only take six weeks. I will remain three at the most, then six weeks back—fifteen in all. Not so very long, my darling. Why, you will hardly have begun to miss me, ere I am back again."

She smiled a little sadly—she did not meet his eyes. "As if every day, every hour, I shall not need you and miss you," cried her heart, but the brave lips were mute. "It is my punishment," she told herself, "my punishment. For one whole year I have been blind and happy and forgetful . . . As if it could last!—as if happiness were ever *meant* to last here, in this world of misery and regret! Oh, the wonder and the mystery of human life and human suffering! How one vainly seeks to solve it! Is it that the perishable is necessary to the eternal? Almost one might think so."

But the week came to an end. She could cheat herself no longer with a hope that something—some charm—some miracle might intervene and give her back her lover.

"Even now I will stay if you wish it," he whispered in that last hour, when they stood beneath the solemn stars and looked with despairing tenderness into each other's face. "Even now. It is so hard—so hard. I never thought it would be like this."

"It is—hard," she said, in a strange, stifled voice; "harder than I thought. Oh, Paul, Paul!" A sob broke from her then, that all her strength could not restrain. She clung to him in sudden terrified abandonment. "If you should never return," she cried. "If you should change or regret—"

"Do you take me for a villain—a brute?" he cried fiercely. "Is not your honour dear as my own? Have I not sworn that while life lasts there shall be no other woman—no other love for me but you?"

The burning colour stained her white uplifted face. "Dear—I know: but men have sworn those oaths before and—broken them. And in that life to which you go, everything will be different. You may learn to regret—to despise."

"Oh, Sheba," he cried brokenly, "do not speak like this. Is it not hard enough to leave you, but must I leave you distrustful?"

"It is the pain," she cried, in the same stifled way. "I meant

to be brave. I would not distress you, Paul, but when you go it is as if all my life were broken off, as a flower is broken from the stem that supports it. You have all the world before you, but I—I have nothing."

"Are your gifts of mind nothing?" he said. "You, too, may have a world if you will. The gifts that mine brings are only of accident, but yours are your own, and each year will but beautify and enrich their store."

Her head dropped on his breast. "Your love is more than all," she said; "if I lost that——"

"You never shall," he answered passionately. "Never, as I live. Tell me you believe it, or I cannot leave you in peace. What have I done that you should doubt me in such an hour as this?"

"I will not doubt you, Paul," she said, lifting her white face once more; "never till your own lips bid me do so. But now go; go while I am strong enough to bid you. Between us, all has been said, save just—Good-bye."

"Oh, my own, my own! . . . may Heaven guard and bless you till we meet again."

Her lips met his; her eyes looked back to his—brave, loving, trustful, as always they had looked in that glad golden year. Between them—all had been said.



How those first cold empty days passed, Sheba could never remember. Desolate beyond all desolation was her life to her then, for that life had only lived in the love and tenderness of another since the hour of passionate abandonment that had sealed her doom.

Müller watched her unceasingly and with a great dread at his heart. He thought she would be ill if she could not be roused. She never ate, or slept, or did anything save sit in her little lonely room in a stupor of grief that found no relief in tears or complaints, or in any natural outlet such as most women find so readily.

He watched her, he followed her out like some old shaggy faithful hound, but she neither heeded nor spoke to him; she had, indeed, no thought of any one, save of the man who was already beyond her sight and touch, and no consciousness of anything save the dread, strong, terrible misery that had crushed out all the joy, and all the hope of her heart.

She was mad, if love be madness, and at times he longed to tell her so; but the sight of her suffering restrained him, and life

had taught him patience, though never had he needed it so sorely as now.

But gradually she recovered. The fortitude and strength of her nature asserted themselves, and day by day some dormant energy awoke, and she gathered up endurance and courage, and began to look out on the sunlight and beauty with seeing eyes once more, and to speak less sadly, and to think of the needs of daily life and of the old familiar household cares, and to tell herself, "I must live and hope, because *he* lives."

By-and-by there came a time when life knew a need more imperative, and an obligation more compulsory than her love for her lover. She had to rouse herself and think and act. It was two months since Paul had left—time for some news of him to reach her, and every day she rose with the hope of that expected letter strong in her heart.

It did not reach her, for the very good reason that it lay at the bottom of the sea, Paul having trusted it to a vessel which they spoke on the way, because he thought she would get it sooner. The vessel was wrecked in a frightful storm which overtook it some days before sighting Melbourne. A few of the crew were picked up afterwards, but the letters and stores were lost for ever.

Every day she would look at Müller with that mute inquiry in her eyes, but mails came in and vessels of every description arrived daily in the port, and still there was no letter. She tried to work, but there was no heart in what she did, and when she submitted the papers to the old German, he saw that their composition was merely mechanical labour, without the impulse and inspiration and freshness that had lent her first book so great a charm.

He grew restless and impatient as the waning summer days wore on.

"To think that a man's love should slay all *that!*" he thought, as he looked from her book to herself, and saw that she vainly tried to rouse herself, or to throw the old zeal and energy and delight into the pages she transcribed.

Sometimes in the lonely moonlight nights she would walk to and fro under the garden trees; otherwise she never went out, or stirred beyond the precincts of the little house.

One night he joined her there. He had kept silence; he had been patient so long: at last he spoke.

"If you go on like this you will be ill," he said. "Do you forget what lies before you? You will need all your courage and all your strength."

"I am well enough," she said coldly.

"No," he said, "you are not; you are thin and weak; you eat

nothing ; all your colour is gone ; at night I hear you pacing your room—you take scarcely any rest. And all for what ? Ah, *mein Fräulein*, have reason ; be sensible, as your old Müller is. Let me say to you the old philosophy : ' Fate is strong—it is useless to rebel.' Your letter will come no quicker because you watch the road, or read of the mails that are due ; your lover will not arrive one day sooner for all that you fret and wear yourself ill with longing and suspense. If he is coming back, he will come back. Can you not be consoled and patient ? As for the letter—the little bit of paper—bah ! Let us think calmly for one moment of the dangers to which that little bit of paper is subject. Hundreds and thousands of letters are written that never reach their destination. True, you may say, ' Why should just *mine* be singled out ? ' I only say again, as I have said so many times before—the ' Irony of Fate.' The more you look on life, and its accidents and results, the more you are convinced that a peculiarly malignant, spiteful little demon sits like a spider in his web, catching up all the flies of incident and opportunity. Out of a hundred letters, yours is just *the* letter that could comfort, restore, and delight one anxious, faithful heart. ' I must have that letter,' says the demon. ' Let the other ninety-nine go ; but I must catch that one.' So he catches it. How, I know not. It slips down a crack of a letter-box ; it is dropped on the way to the office, and some one steals the stamp ; it is in a mail-bag that falls overboard ; it is in a steamer that is wrecked, and one never more hears of. So it is . . . for why ? Because out of all kinds and numbers of letters, it is just *the* one that is most anxiously desired. Mrs. John Snooks writes to Mrs. James Robinson, and Mrs. James Robinson gets the letter. Why ? Because she cares nothing for Mrs. John Snooks, and only thinks, ' Bother the woman ! I shall have to answer her.' You see ? Now be a brave, hopeful *Fräulein* as of old. If it is to come, it will come. Say to yourself that ; then the colour will come back to your face, and the desire to eat, and to sleep—all will be well. It was but to set the mind at rest, and there is only one thing to do that—philosophy."

Sheba smiled somewhat mournfully at this tirade.

"No doubt," she said, "you are right. But it is easier to preach philosophy than to exercise it."

"Try," he said, "only try. With the very effort there comes satisfaction that increases and redoubles. Soon one can look out on life cool and dispassionate—taking its joys thankfully, its sorrows resignedly. Believe me that is better—oh ! how much better, I cannot express—than your wild ecstasies and excitements."

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"Oh!" she cried passionately, "do you think I would not be calm if I *could*? Do you think I don't try? But it is too hard for me. He might have written—he ought to have written, and every day that brings another disappointment makes me feel more desperate."

"Hush, hush!" he said soothingly. "You must not speak like that. All human life is more or less associated with pain, bodily or mental; and have I not told you that 'that from which there is no physical or spiritual escape, must be endured as patiently as nature permits.'"

"Nature is cruel," she said wearily, "and so is life, and all the laws that govern it."

"Perhaps," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "At least we think so, because the human organization is averse to suffering in any shape or form. But we cannot escape. Never was man or woman born into this world who had not a share. That is one positive way, at all events, in which the 'Unknowable' has manifested himself since the entrance of sin into the plan of Creation. Now, looking on life, we find that evil is the predominating force. For every joy—a double allowance of sorrow; for every granted blessing—a million disadvantages. To illustrate it, *mein Fräulein*, here is a lovely country, cursed by heat and—mosquitoes——"

"Especially mosquitoes," said Sheba with a faint smile. "But perhaps nature has provided them as an excuse for smokers, like yourself."

"That is unkind," he said; "though with your gracious permission I go to light my pipe and protect myself from the enemies. There are too many insects in the world, *mein Fräulein*; that is so. Some day I will write a history on them—'The History of Superfluous Insects.' . . . I must put down that title."

"I wonder," said Sheba, "how many titles you have put down, and when the histories they have suggested, will be written."

"Paul said that once," he answered. "I told him life might be long enough even for me to write my histories. First, I await a chance that there will be a race likely to read them. One great mistake is the life that lives in an age that cannot comprehend it."

"I think," said Sheba wearily, "life is all a mistake. It seems to have no why, or wherefore."

"Oh," he said coolly, "it has its uses as well as its martyrs. Others worked for us, and we work for others; others suffered, and we reap the reward. But youth will always make the mistake of expecting too much, of imagining it is of pre-eminent individual

importance ; that its desires, its dreams, its loves, its hopes are all to be considered and realized . . . and we are to the great mass of humanity only as the little spot in the map that marks one place among a million ; the piece in the child's puzzle that helps to make the whole intelligible ; not till we learn that truth can we master the secret of philosophy—content and patience. So suffering has its uses, you see, hard as it seems to believe it."

She moved along beside him under the heavy eucalyptus boughs. Her hands were loosely clasped before her ; her eyes, that used to seek the stars, now only sought the ground.

She sighed wearily. "Dear Müller," she said, "I realize the truth of your words, but they do not comfort me. Everything is so different—now."

"Ah!" he said impatiently ; "why will you women love? You spoil your lives always, and only for a dream."

"I suppose," she said, "we cannot help it." Then she hesitated ; the shy, soft colour came and went in her clear pale skin. "Dear friend," she said brokenly, "you have been so good, so kind, and never one word of rebuke or reproach—and I am sure—I am sure you blame me. You think I have done very wrong . . ."

"Child," he said gently, "do not ever speak like that to me. I am not a God ; I blame no one. As for right or wrong—those fundamental principles of morality—they are words inflated by the breath of every social distinction. If we are to believe 'whatever is, is right,' there can be no question of wrong at all. If wrong exists, or is caused to exist, then whatever is, is *not* right. Right is a condition of things appealing to certain minds ; but what is right in one mind may be totally wrong to another. The savage does not think it right that his territories should be wrested from him, and his freedom destroyed ; but the white man does, and takes them. The labourer does not think it right that he should toil early and late, and subsist on coarse fare, while his employer lives a life of luxury and idleness on the fruit of his toil and scanty wage. Morality deems it right that our sentiments, emotions, and inclinations should be gratified within reasonable degrees ; but no two temperaments would define a *reasonable* degree in exactly the same way. Who is to decide which is the *right* way? If it is a question of the one that combines the least harm to others, we would want a Committee of Inspection for each case! It is quite impossible to decide how far our deeds control or affect the lives of others. An action is like the dropping of a pebble in a pool. Who can



count the circles that spring from that one fact? Self-denial and self-sacrifice are beautiful virtues, but they may do an immense amount of harm physically and morally; for experience shows that they are invariably exercised for the benefit of very unworthy objects, who stand in some personal relation to the exerciser. So you see, *mein Fräulein*, your actions concern yourself, and you best know how they came about, and it is you—not I—who have to suffer for them. Why, then, should I blame you? As for the right or the wrong of the case, far be it from me to express myself. A pure, unselfish love is rare in this world. When a woman loves she thinks there is only one god in the earth, and she calls it—'He.' When she finds that passion is selfish and exacting, she sacrifices herself at the shrine of 'He.' If that passion grows chill, or indifferent, she finds the fault in herself—'He' is still perfect, still adorable. Ah, well, I am a foolish old man. I can talk, talk, talk. It will never alter woman. One wonders sometimes how that God they worship, made them so foolish, and so wise, and so lovable, all in one."

He drew her arm within his own with a sudden gesture of tenderness. "Do not think badly of your old Müller," he said. "He has never blamed you; he is your friend for always. But oh, my dear! my dear! don't pin all the faith and trust of your great heart on a man's love. . . . Did I not tell you that all women's idols have feet of clay?"

"Not Paul's," she said very low, and with a great beauty and tenderness in her uplifted eyes.

"Oh, no," said the old German grimly, "not Paul's. Certainly not—Paul's. His are pure gold."

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## CHAPTER XLVIII.

### A LIFE FOR A LIFE.

THE air had grown close and sultry while they paced the dusky garden walks. The faint breeze died away, and that ominous stillness which forbodes a storm oppressed the atmosphere.

"*Ach!*" said Müller, lifting his straw hat, "but this would be a delightful land if it had two months less of summer."

"I am tired; I think I will go in," said Sheba wearily, as they neared the verandah.

"Well, I will make myself some exercise," said Müller. "I

cannot sleep when a storm is threatening. I go towards the river," he added, as she withdrew her arm. "Now be good, be wise, *mein Fräulein*; sit down and read one of our good old friends, and try to be philosophical. Do not write—your brain wants rest. Then, too, your heart will grow calm."

She said nothing; only went quietly into the low trellised verandah. A lamp was burning on the table, the bamboo chairs were scattered about in their usual careless fashion, some littered with books and papers and music—the music at which Müller worked so perseveringly.

"For fame," he said, "since that an audience had yet to be born who would understand anything deeper than 'Trovatore,' or 'Tom Bowling.'"

She seated herself beside the table, and took up one of the English periodicals that had come in by the last mail.

Turning over the pages, she came upon a review of her own book, "Damaris." With a little thrill of pardonable pride she read the frank praise, the kindly hints, and the welcome encouragement it gave her. Was her childish prayer to be granted, she wondered? The prayer that had asked for neither beauty, nor love, nor wealth, but only for that one Divine gift which makes all other things of life of little value, because in itself it holds all.

It had seemed so easy to her to write; her imagination was so vivid, her fancies so quick, that strange education of hers had so enlarged her mind and ripened its forces of thought and expression, that the effort to curb and curtail had cost her far more than the effort to construct her story.

And every one spoke well of it, and none of those critics and reviewers had discovered the secret of the author's sex. The book was always attributed to a man—young and inexperienced, but still a man. She smiled a little as she laid down the notice. "I suppose," she said, "I owe that severe style to Müller. How he did prune and curtail and ridicule what he called my 'flowers of expression.' I owe him a great deal."

She heard the click of the garden gate as she pushed the magazine aside, and took up a book in its place. She supposed it was Müller returning, and did not look up. The lamplight fell on her bent head with its lovely wealth of hair and on the graceful outlines of her figure, as she leant forward, supporting her cheek on her hand.

Suddenly, without warning or ceremony, a voice broke the stillness—the voice of a woman, and a stranger.

"I suppose," it said, "you—are Sheba Ormatroyd?"

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The girl started, her hand dropped. She looked back into a strange and unknown face, with blue mocking eyes, and bright hair, that made a warm red halo round the white brows.

"You are very unceremonious," she said, "but as you seem to know my name, perhaps you will state your business."

"My business!" said the woman with a coarse laugh. "Well, first it's to see you. Second to tell you a piece of news that's too good to keep. I've had some trouble to find you out. Girls of your stamp aren't generally so close; maybe you're one of the mock virtuous lot! However——"

Sheba rose to her feet. Some premonition of the truth flashed across her. Her face grew white as death, but her eyes, sombre and defiant, flashed back to that insulting gaze.

"Who are you, and why do you come here?" she said haughtily. "I have no wish to hear your news. You are a total stranger; you can know nothing that concerns me."

"I know a great deal," said the woman insolently; "more, perhaps, than you think. I know first that you are my husband's mistress, and have been trying to take him from me. Yes, you may start. I am Paul Meredith's wife—and *the law has given him back to me*. That's my news. How do you like it? I thought I'd bring it myself. Best to show there was no animosity. You thought to get him, did you! Well, I don't admire his taste, but that's neither here, nor there——"

A faint cry of horror left the girl's pale lips. Words she could find none; the veins in her throat seemed to swell; everything grew dim and dark before her eyes. "*His wife!*" she cried in her heart. . . . "Oh, God of Heaven—his wife!"

"You see," continued the woman leisurely, "I knew the case would go against him if I secured the cleverest man. Bless you, I've come out as innocent as a lamb, and he—as black as Satan—if he is black. Myself I think there's a deal more wickedness in the white side of humanity. . . . Well, you see Paul wasn't in court, and I was. Then the lawyer. . . . he was quite in love with me, and so was the judge—a merry old soul with a shrewish wife. He wasn't above a spree on the sly, for all his wigs and gowns. You see women are scarce here as yet, and when a pretty one does crop up—whew—w!—she can just twiddle the men round her fingers! That's why I stayed in Melbourne and did the wronged and deserted wife. And, you see, *you* were a great card to play!—the trump of trumps I may say. And now you know how it stands. I've come here to tell you that I mean to have my husband back. . . . and that you can walk. . . . just as soon as ever you like. He's gone to England, and I'm going to

follow him. He may soon be an earl, and I intend to be a countess, whether he likes it or not. There's the child too. He's the lawful heir, and I'm going to stick to him. Now do you see how the land lies? You have had your innings. You had best go and find another lover. It won't take you long in Melbourne, and the price is just what you like to fix . . . My!—if the girl isn't going to faint . . . By Jove, I thought she'd take it easier than that."

Sheba had sunk back on the bamboo lounge, sick to death with shame and horror. Her senses reeled—she could neither see nor hear, but the echo of those coarse, brutal words, seemed to beat on her brain like a brazen hammer.

The woman moved forward—she saw that the girl had lost consciousness, and in common humanity went to her relief. She loosened her gown and laid her back on the seat. Suddenly her eyes flashed. She uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"I wouldn't have said it if I had known—that!" she muttered. "Poor thing! she looks but a child . . . So this is what all that pretence of living away from the house came to . . . And Paul who always set up for a saint . . . My! . . . just as if they ain't all alike: saint and sinner—judge and jury. I've had some experience, and I ought to know!"

She was bathing Sheba's brow with cold water, and fanning her with one of Müller's MS. sheets of music while these thoughts occupied her mind. But the girl did not revive, and after a time she grew alarmed. She raised her voice and called for help, but no one appeared. Again she cried, and yet again.

Suddenly the gate opened—there was a sound of rapid steps. "*Donnerwetter!* What's the matter . . . Woman, who are you, and what have you done to the *Fräulein?*"

"Never mind who I am just now," said the woman insolently. "I only came to see her on a matter of business, and just as I was leaving she was took like this. I don't know if you're a married man, but if you'll take my advice, just carry her to her bed. You look strong enough, though she's no fairy, and then I'll look after her while you go for a doctor . . . And you'd best look sharp, too. Haven't you any female about the place?—'cause I should like some one handy."

Müller had listened dumb and stupefied to these directions, but one look at the girl's death-like face decided him to act first, and talk afterwards. Perhaps the woman was a dressmaker, or a nurse. He did not parley further, but lifting Sheba in his arms, bore her to her own room, and then went off for the nearest doctor.

Meanwhile Sheba's self-appointed attendant undressed her with

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deft and strangely gentle fingers, and again tried all possible means to restore her to consciousness.

Once the girl sighed heavily and opened her eyes, then with a little hysterical cry lapsed once more into insensibility.

The woman grew seriously uneasy at last. "Good Lord! supposing she dies!" she muttered. "Nothing seems to rouse her. I never thought she was in this state, or I wouldn't have done it, not even for the sweetness of revenge. To think how I've counted on this hour, and thought what glorious fun it would be to tell her how I'd won the fight, and now——"

If Müller had heard her he would have said she, too, was only illustrating his favourite theory of the Irony of Fate.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was an hour and a half before Müller returned, bringing the doctor with him. The stranger and the servant were both with Sheba. She was still unconscious.

The grief and anxiety of those two months, coupled with the shock of that terrible announcement, had proved too much for her strength. The doctor looked grave when he saw her condition, and as hour after hour passed she grew worse. The servant, a young inexperienced girl, was worse than useless, and he speedily ordered her out of the room. Finding that the other woman was handy and free from all nervousness, he begged her to remain through the night. He imagined she was a friend of the unfortunate girl, whose state grew momentarily more critical, and he had no time to waste on useless questions.

Müller paced the verandah the whole night long, in a frame of mind that defied philosophy. He was telling himself that from first to last it was he who had played the *Deus ex machinâ* of Sheba Ormatroyd's fate. He had inserted that advertisement which brought her to their house—he had engaged her—he had talked of her to Paul until the young man's interest was awakened too deeply for his own peace of mind. He had counselled him to run away with her, and again, when that fatal barrier had arisen between them, he it was who had persuaded the girl to remain still under their roof, though he might well have known the danger of such a proceeding.

"I only meant to educate her mind," he told himself again and again in self-extenuation. "I meant her to be such a woman as the world has rarely seen; and look what I have made of her. While I was dreaming of her future, love was undermining all my work . . . . Some day I will write a history of Sublime Follies—as illustrated by woman—and show how she spoils all her genius, talent, and fame, by some weakness such as Sheba has displayed.

They are all alike—ready to forget themselves and what they owe to their genius, and barter all for a man's sake . . . . But we are nearly as foolish. I, with all my philosophy, I was not wise enough to turn away from a girl's sad face and big pathetic eyes. I, who had sworn all my life to occupy myself but with my own fortunes, and when I am old and grey, and should have been hard and selfish too, I turn aside and meddle with the fate of another. I am rightly served . . . . There was never a female creature born who did not make a man repent the hour in which he turned aside to aid her. I am not the first. There is no fear that I shall be the last—if that is consolation."

But it was not consolation as he paced to and fro, and watched the lightning play over the dark sky, and heard the roll of the thunder through the sultry night, and the fall of the heavy rain among the leaves without. Not consolation when each report from that silent room had more of dread, and less of hope.

\* \* \* \* \*

The rain had ceased. There was a faint glow of saffron and rose in the eastern sky. Müller paused to look at it, when a cry reached his ears, a cry of more than mortal agony.

Then a window was hurriedly opened. The doctor put out his head and called to him :

"We must have further advice," he said. "I can't take the responsibility. See here—go to this address; he is the best doctor in Melbourne. Tell him to come at once and bring his instruments. Stay—I had best write it down. Lose no time—every moment is of importance."

Müller took the card. He felt bewildered—almost afraid. "Is there—danger?" he asked faintly.

"Danger!" said the physician curtly, as he began to close the window. "Yes; two lives hang in the balance. *One* must be sacrificed before many hours are past."

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## CHAPTER XLIX.

"GOOD-BYE, PAUL!"

THROUGH fever-mists of pain and semi-madness, the brain of Sheba Ormatroyd struggled back to consciousness.

She opened her eyes on the dim light of her own little chamber. It was strangely still; she seemed quite alone. The white net curtains were drawn back from the low iron bedstead, the furniture was in its accustomed place; yet it seemed as if long, long years had passed since she had seen them.

She half rose from the pillows. How weak she felt. Had she been ill? She pushed the heavy hair from off her brow and tried to think what had happened. She had been talking to Müller—ah, yes—then she was reading—then . . .

She sank back with a faint cry. She remembered it all now—all.

That woman, that bold, hard-faced woman who had told her she was Paul's wife—that the law had given him back to her. Never again could he be hers, to love, to care for. The law had said so—the hard, cruel law of man, which had decreed he was bound to an adulteress, a harlot—almost a murderess!

She covered there among the pillows, and covered her eyes with her hands. Memory spoke of anguish suffered. The silence around was full of ghostly noises rising higher and higher in a scale of terror that wrung her very soul. Outside, the trees whispered, the soft stir of wings spoke of flitting shapes, and the flutter of life among the thick-leaved creepers and drooping boughs beyond her silent chamber.

As she heard, other memories came thronging thick and fast. A time of more than mortal agony—of strange faces bent above her—of strange voices whispering around her . . .

"It is dead—of course—better the child than the mother . . ."

*The child*—her child; it was dead, then . . . In her heart she was thankful that no look or voice of her unknown offspring could ever remind her of its father. Better the child than the mother! Oh, no! no! What fool had said that? What was life to her now! What could it ever be again! She felt only the terrible, inexorable humiliation of one truth. That other woman was Paul's wife—the adulteress who had wronged him—not she—never, never she—the girl who had loved him better than her own life, ay, loved him to her own undoing! As she thought of it, reason and hope alike deserted her. She looked out on one wide, blank desolation, and her soul cried out, "It is too hard; I cannot bear it."

She lay there with closed eyes—a dull stupor held her senses. Suddenly a voice sounded; she started up, every nerve quivering with horror. That voice—that hateful, terrible voice. How came she here? Why had she not followed Paul as she had threatened? The voice came nearer. She heard the familiar accents of the old German answering it.

"Indeed, my good lady, but for you I know not what we should have done . . . The doctors say you have saved her life."

Sheba hid her face on the pillow. What could they mean! Saved her life—this creature—this cruel fiend who had taunted

her with her shame . . . had told her that Paul was hers, and that she was going to enforce her claims without an hour's delay.

She almost laughed in derisive scorn. Had Müller gone mad, or was her enemy acting a part in order to have the greater triumph? She lifted her head and listened again. Yes, it was true. This woman had stayed with her in those hours of peril; had nursed and tended her till danger was over . . . *This woman!*

It seemed incredible. It seemed an outrage on all decency. It made her blood boil with shame and horror unutterable. And yet it was true—*true*. Then a very delirium of terror and of shame seized her strained and weakened fancy. Never again should this woman rest under the same roof with her, tend her, speak to her, minister to her wants and necessities. Never, whilst she had life to resist, strength to rebel.

The force of passion lent her strength that was almost super-human. Every nerve was strung to its utmost tension, every vein throbbled as with the torture of a newly-recognized outrage.

Ah, no! Let life go, as love had gone! Let the gates of existence close for ever on this fragment of another suffering mortal's history.

Stealthily, yet with the force of determination in her fevered movements, she crept out of bed—she thrust her naked feet into slippers, and, catching up a long dark cloak that hung behind the door, she threw it round her and drew the hood over her head. Then she opened the window softly and peered into the dark verandah beyond. No one was there, but the voices still reached her from the adjoining sitting-room.

The air was cool and fresh, the sky ablaze with stars. That coolness was delicious. Alas! it could not check the madness rushing swiftly as the blood itself through those fevered veins, mounting with wild hysterical force to the throbbing brain. Across the garden paths a dark shadow flitted, across the road beyond and down to the dark river, rapid and swollen now with heavy rains.

How swiftly the waters flowed—and out there beyond was the sea—the deep, dark, rolling sea—the sea that would bring her rest and sleep and peace—that would give Paul back his freedom—that would end her sorrows for ever . . .

She stood a moment on the bank, looking upwards to the shining silver worlds that filled the vaults of space. Suddenly a thought flashed through the pain and madness that held her in their grasp . . . "If the end of this life be but the beginning of another—if that other be cursed by memory of *this!* Oh, God, if it be so, how fearful and useless an exchange. How more than cruel the destiny of the undying soul!"



She threw her wild despairing arms out to the silent night and the deep, swift waters . . . "Good-bye, Paul, good-bye"—she whispered. "*You* at least will know why I could not live, once I knew the truth."

A sudden gust of wind caught the loose folds of her cloak. As it blew away from her throat the strain attracted her notice with a sudden sense of restraint and impatience. Involuntarily she put up her hand and loosed the fastenings. The heavy cloak fell off her, and lay on the bank at her feet.

One moment she stood there, a white slender form with dusky rippling hair tossed back from the mute agony of her upraised face—one moment—then . . . her arms fell to her side, and as a stone falls, she fell into the dark flowing water below.

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CHAPTER L.

"THE BRUISED REED."

MRS. LEVISON lay on the couch in what she liked to call "her boudoir," in a state of misery, physical pain, and terror, that can best be described as "abject."

For some months past she had declared herself to be out of health—an announcement which her husband received with scorn and incredulity.

"You are too stout, you ought to take more exercise," he said. But Mrs. Levison knew that the stoutness was unnatural, and that the exercise if attempted was a painful and laboured exertion. She had at last sent for a doctor, the best that Sydney could boast of, and the result of his opinion was the terror and misery just described.

It is a curious fact that human beings who are face to face with the chances and perils of death all their lives, never realize that he has an individual claim upon their attention until that claim is forced upon them by some special warning.

That warning had come to Mrs. Levison—come suddenly and without preparation. True, there was no immediate danger, but if within six months she did not undergo an operation, her life would be seriously threatened.

An operation! Mrs. Levison heard the dread words and shrieked with horror. Then she declared she would rather die than undergo it; . . . next that if she *did* undergo it, she would only trust herself to the known skill of an English surgeon, and would go back to her native land by the very next mail.

For a month she had gone on in this manner until Mr. Levison

really did not know what to make of her. When he heard how serious the illness was, he declared himself perfectly willing to take her to England, but when she heard that, she would not make up her mind to go. No: . . . she might get worse . . . she might die on the voyage. . . Better remain where she was than be buried at sea. She could only rest in consecrated ground.

When matters were in this state, Allison Saxton came back to Sydney, her brother having gone to a wild and unfrequented part of South Australia, where he could not take the girls. Naturally, she went to see Mrs. Levison—more to glean some news of Sheba than because she wished to renew the acquaintance of her mother. When she found Mrs. Levison in such a critical and miserable condition, her natural kindness of heart prompted her to visit her as often as was possible, and after a time she even induced the invalid to see Noel Hill.

In truth, Mrs. Levison's mind had become almost subjective—for her—and she was ready to accept any possible consolation. She clung to Allison Saxton with almost desperate tenacity. Her calm sweet face, her gentle voice, the peace and steadfastness of her nature were just the attractions Mrs. Levison herself lacked, and now began dimly to appreciate. No doubt she was ill, very ill, and her mind began to lose its hold of earthly vanities, and to see the purposelessness of gold, and luxury, and fine clothing, once the end of life threw its prophetic shadow over the external gloss and beauty which had deluded her senses.

No one can contemplate the approach of death without a shock, let them be ever so confident as to their own deserts in the next life, or so full of trust in the oft quoted (and little understood) merits of a Divine sacrifice. As long as that "end" is an abstract thing, lending itself to philosophical discussion—a possibility far off and scarcely realized in any personal sense, they feel comparatively brave, but once let the chill of approaching doom, the knowledge of the pronounced fiat come straight and sure to individual consciousness, and the bravery is found to be only assumed—a poor comfortless pretence from which the soul shrinks, and at which the heart quakes.

Mrs. Levison had always been an obstinate, prejudiced, and assertive woman. A woman greatly given to believe in the superiority of her own virtues, and the excellence of her own judgment.

It had never seemed possible to her that she could be visited by such a misfortune as now threatened her, and at times she even felt called upon to declare that the doctor must be mistaken, that a disease such as he described could not possibly have taken

hold of her ; but when other advice was called in and the opinion was still the same, she grew terrified and submissive, and in this mood she was ready to do anything and believe anything that would atone for the errors and omissions of this life, and serve as a safe passport of admission to the next.

One chilly autumn evening Miss Saxton was sitting by the side of the invalid in her own luxurious room. She had been very ill all day, and pain had left her weak and exhausted. For some time the two women had sat silently there in the gathering dusk, their thoughts absent and pre-occupied.

Mrs. Levison spoke at last. "I cannot understand," she said, "what made Noel Hill start off to Melbourne in that extraordinary fashion. I wish he would come back."

"He only went for a fortnight to take a friend's duty," said Aunt Allison soothingly. "He will soon be back now."

"A fortnight," murmured Mrs. Levison in her weak complaining voice. "How long it seems. How much I miss him. Ah, if I had had such a son. Hex does not care a rap for any one. He is a mass of selfishness. He never comes to inquire after me, or see me, and after all I have done for him I did expect a little gratitude in return. Ah me ! I have never had any comfort in my children. Look at Sheba. Not a word—not a line since she married. At least she might have written to say where she was, and if she was happy."

"She did not like to write, I expect," said Miss Saxton. "She knew how averse you were to her husband. You told me you had said you would never allow him to set foot in your house."

"Yes, I did. But sometimes I have thought I was too hasty. I remember what he said about his family, that he was of really good birth, as good as Count Pharamond's. If that was true . . . if some day he inherited a title or an estate in England, I should like to feel I had forgiven them, and that we were reconciled."

Miss Saxton could not restrain a smile of amusement at this naïve declaration. Fortunately, the dusk hid it. She bent forward and stirred the fire into a blaze. "Shall I ring for lights?" she said.

"Not just yet," answered Mrs. Levison. "Stay—surely that was the bell; . . . who can it be? . . . perhaps Noel Hill has returned."

Allison Saxton rose and went to the door and opened it. "Yes," she said, "it is his step. He is speaking to some one—now is he coming here. Will you see him?"

"Of course I will see him. Ask him in at once."

She rose from her pillow, and held out her hands eagerly to the young man as he advanced towards her. Miss Saxton looked at him keenly. She thought the change to Melbourne and the sea trip had certainly not benefited his health. He looked pale, and worn, and haggard, as a man looks who has borne some long strain of mental anxiety. She closed the door and took her old place beside the bright wood fire. She left Noel Hill to do the talking, knowing that Mrs. Levison dearly loved manly sympathy and condolence.

But Noel Hill seemed strangely absent and silent. It seemed an effort to him to collect his thoughts, or talk connectedly for two minutes together.

"What is the matter, Mr. Hill?" asked Allison Saxton at last. "Have you met with any trouble or misfortune since you left Sydney—or was the sea too unkind to you? I know you are not the best sailor in the world."

He started almost nervously. . . . "The sea," he said—"yes . . . I had a bad passage . . . it was terribly rough—but you are right, Miss Saxton, something is troubling me. Since I left here I have learnt the sad fate of—of a very dear friend. The history altogether is so tragic and terrible that I cannot think of it calmly; it is the history of a woman's dream of mortal happiness broken short by one of those terrible accidents we call 'fatality.'"

Mrs. Levison leant back on her pillows and applied herself to her smelling-salts. "Will you tell it to us?" she said—"that is to say if it is not too sad. My nerves are so shattered by my own terrible sufferings that I cannot bear to hear of horrors."

"I think," said the young clergyman, "you ought to hear—this; if only to show you what others have to suffer and endure."

He came over towards the fire, and leaning one arm against the mantelpiece began his story:

"The night before I left Melbourne," he said, "I had been called to see a sick person living on the outskirts of the town. I was returning home when by some mischance I missed my way, and never noticed it until I found myself nearing the river. I stopped to take my bearings. Suddenly I saw a dark figure flit out from the shadows of the trees, and glide swiftly down towards the banks. It looked so strange, so eerie—that I will confess to a momentary feeling of fear. As I watched—the arms were upraised—a dark covering fell to the ground. Before me I saw a woman clothed in some white loose drapery. She looked up to the sky . . . then, without sound—without warning, she flung herself headlong into the swift, dark water. For a second or two I was

so paralyzed with horror I could not move. Then—I rushed forwards . . . . I saw something white floating a short distance off . . . . in a moment I was in the water, too, and striking out in the direction . . . . When I reached the spot the woman had sunk again. She rose once more—I seized the floating garments—how I got her to land I cannot tell. God gave me strength even as He must have directed my steps there—to that spot . . . ."

"You—you saved her?" cried Mrs. Levison, now fairly interested; "dear me, you are quite a hero!"

"Yes," he said sternly, "I saved her . . . . thank God!"

"And why did she want to commit suicide?" inquired Mrs. Levison, with another application to the smelling-salts.

"Why?" he said bitterly, "because life was too hard for her—because she was alone, and desolate, and most bitterly wronged . . . . because," and his voice quivered, and Allison Saxton, looking up, saw that his eyes were dim, and his whole face convulsed as with some terrible agony—"because man and God alike seemed to have deserted her, and she was mad with suffering and grief!"

"Did she tell you her story!" asked Mrs. Levison in a softened and half-fearful voice—recognizing dimly the shadow of a tragedy such as her own life had never known.

"Yes," he said. "Will you hear it?"

She did not answer; but he scarcely noticed that.

Briefly, yet with the force and fervour of intense feeling, he told them the story of a girl's ruined life. He painted its early promise, its struggles, its gifts; he showed them its inner warfare in an uncongenial atmosphere—the rich and passionate nature craving love, and finding naught but coldness and indifference. Then, the hour of temptation; the sudden abandonment of duty; the utter and perfect submission to another rule—the rule of that love her soul had so long craved; the love that instead of her guardian had been her destroyer.

And as he spoke a strange white horror crept over Mrs. Levison's face, and Allison Saxton's heart began to beat with terror and apprehension. Before that story was ended she had sprung to her feet, and grasped his arm. Trembling and sick with dread she cried out: "Her name—her name?"

Then the woman on the couch flung out her hands as if to ward off some terrible nameless thing, that in the gathering gloom crept nearer, and yet more near . . . . "No, no," she shrieked. "Say it is not . . . . Oh! my God—say it is not—Sheba."

He raised his white face and looked sternly back at the terrified woman. "It *is* Sheba," he said. "It was your daughter I saved from a suicide's grave . . . . It is her history you have heard . . . ."

For a moment dead silence reigned throughout the room. It was broken at last by a frightened whisper, "Where—is she?"

Noel Hill hesitated. He looked at Allison Saxton's noble face—then at that white changed one beyond. At last he said very low: "I brought her—here. After all, you are her mother; she could go to no one else."

Swift as thought Allison Saxton crossed the room and seized the trembling hands. "He is right," she said; "you are her mother. Oh! don't be hard; don't be unforgiving. Think of what she has suffered. Think that God, perchance, sends this as a task for you to fulfil. Let me bring her to you . . . say you will forgive."

Mrs. Levison hesitated.

The shock of hearing this terrible story—the story of her own child's ruin—had stirred the very depths of even her shallow nature. She had always prophesied evil of Sheba, but she had not expected such an awful fulfilment of her prophecies. She shuddered as she thrust aside Aunt Allison's clinging hands, and cowered back on her pillows.

"No!" she cried weakly, "I can't see her! I can't bear it . . . I am not strong enough for the shock. Oh! the disgrace—the horror of such a story . . . and every one will know it. I can never hold my head up again."

"Mrs. Levison," said Noel Hill sternly, "this is sheer nonsense. A plain duty lies before you—you must fulfil or neglect it, as you choose; but you cannot evade its knowledge. Had you seen your daughter as I have seen her—heard her story as I have heard it, you would not have the heart to hesitate one single moment. She is below—waiting. May I bring her to you?"

Still Mrs. Levison hesitated and wavered. It was asking too much of her, she felt. At last she dropped her handkerchief: "I have always done my duty—all my life," she sobbed. "No one shall say I neglected it even under such—a—terrible trial. Yes,—bring that unfortunate, misguided girl to her heartbroken mother!"

Noel Hill went rapidly over to the door. There he paused and looked back . . . "Promise me," he said, "you will not be hard on her. She is ill and sadly changed. She cannot bear harshness——"

"I hope," said Mrs. Levison, with a faint revival of the old spirit—"I do hope, Mr. Hill, that I know my duty as a mother and a Christian. I shall not 'break the bruised reed' even though I feel I ought to administer rebuke, instead of pardon."

CHAPTER LI.

"THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN."

MRS. LEVISON might have gone as near to "breaking the bruised reed" as she dared, without the reed resenting it.

When she saw that white stony face, those great pathetic eyes, the wonderful beauty and the still more wonderful gentleness of this once headstrong and troublesome daughter, amazement held her speechless. She could scarcely believe it was Sheba who knelt with bowed head at her side pleading humbly for forgiveness—scarcely believe that this stately and beautiful creature was the child she had been wont to scold and tyrannize over, but a few brief years before.

She could not speak one word of reproach, though Noel Hill and Miss Saxton had withdrawn.

Perhaps for the first time in her selfish and obstinate life, Mrs. Levison felt a pure and unalloyed thrill of Christian pity—the pity that illumines those lovely and gracious words, "Neither do I condemn thee." Perhaps some intuition of the shortness and pettiness of life had come to her—the uselessness of all the pride and pomp of worldly circumstance, and the vanity of self-righteousness; or some voice may have whispered at her heart: "Can we, who forgive not, expect to be forgiven?" Be this as it may, she softened and broke down utterly as she saw her daughter's face once more.

"Don't tell me anything!" she cried; "I have heard enough. I won't blame you, my poor child. I—I am still your mother."

This being an obvious fact, did not seem to call for any special gratitude; but Sheba's low sobs and broken murmurs were all of penitence and remorse.

"You always said I was too headstrong. Oh, mother, mother! how right you were!"

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Levison, to whom her verified prophecies were as balm in Gilead. "You thought I was harsh, but it was only for your good I spoke—only for your own good."

"Can you ever forgive me?" murmured the weeping girl. "Oh, mother, I have suffered so terribly; and now I have no one—no one!"

"I know it, my poor child—do not tell me more. Let the past be buried, and let there be peace between us. I, too, have suffered, Sheba . . . suffered in mind and body. You have only returned to nurse a poor broken wreck; for your mother is not long for this world, my dear—not for very long."

Then she wept bitterly because that truth sounded so pathetic, though she was far from believing it herself. Doctors had been deceived before now, and taken refuge in describing nature's triumphs as "miraculous." Perhaps they are so in the sense of combating erroneous treatment, and obstinate prejudices!

She listened, and consoled, and then, woman-like, broke down also; and for the first time in their lives mother and daughter mingled their tears together.

It was the best and surest way to reconciliation. It only added another weight to the burden of the girl's remorse, while justifying and soothing the mother's pin-pricks of condemnation.

Sheba was quite ready to believe that she had misjudged and wronged her mother—that she had been wilful, passionate, blind and wicked. The revulsion of feeling caused by a reception so different from her expectations, was a revulsion that naturally made all her impulses leap towards her mother, and accuse herself.

Never had Mrs. Levison felt so genial a glow of content and satisfaction as when she listened to Sheba's torrent of self-condemnation, and Sheba's humble and passionate gratitude. Never had she so appreciated the truth of that homely maxim—that "Virtue is its own reward"—as on this occasion.

There was only one drawback to her satisfaction. What would her husband say? But meanwhile she wept with and over Sheba, and almost believed in her daughter's reiterated and passionate assurance that she herself was "an angel of goodness."

\* \* \* \* \*

Wearied and spent, Sheba lay in her own old room that night. She looked so terribly ill that Aunt Allison would not leave her, but resolved to lie down on the couch by her side.

When she heard of what the girl had recently undergone, she marvelled that she was still alive.

From time to time they spoke in low disjointed murmurs, for sleep would not visit them; and the memory of old days came thronging back, and by that light it was not difficult to understand the errors of that girlish history.

"You know," Sheba said, "how I was always wondering and thinking about life, and what it would be, and how much deeper and fuller it *ought* to be than just the mere existence. And when I met Müller, it seemed as if the gates of a new world had been thrown open to me . . . everything was changed—all I used to believe in seemed poor, or trivial, or wrong—and he told me so much . . . more than I could bear, I sometimes thought; and then everyday life, just the eating and drinking, and working and sleeping—oh, it seemed so small, so trivial. Just like one step on



a ladder that reached to all eternity . . . . one day in all the vast ages that had been, and still will be. . . . And the only thing that seemed to make it enduring, or give one strength to bear, and courage to fight all its doubts and difficulties, seemed just—love. The love of one human being for another ; and that love I had ; the best gift of life—such love as I had dimly dreamt of, and never believed I could claim for myself."

"But, dear," said Aunt Allison gently, "you cannot surely believe that this man you worshipped was in any way better than any other of his sex—to whom love is merely the garment that clothes the selfishness of passion. He has wrecked your whole life—destroyed the purity of your womanhood. *That* is not love—not the divine unselfish part of love, that would not desecrate the object of its worship, but lives only for its highest happiness."

"You do not understand," said Sheba wearily. "It is not to be expected . . . . No one outside the circle of our own knowledge *could* understand how it all came about. He was as reverent—as unselfish—as patient as man could be. But it was very hard . . . always that hateful unjust law between us . . . always the dread that after all we might be parted. We had vowed before Heaven that come what might we would be true to each other . . . . Oh, it looks like madness no doubt ; sometimes I think I was mad. There seemed no use in holding out. No human laws could consecrate our love more deeply than our own souls had done. And it is there—for always. We are parted now—but he will never forget—and I shall never forget. And that one year held happiness so perfect and divine, that for its sake I was content to let all the future go."

Allison Saxton was silent. What could she say? It did indeed sound like madness ; but was there something in that madness purer, deeper, holier than half the legalized barter upon which the Church sets its seal, and the world smiles its approval?

Almost she thought so as she looked at that young and noble face, and heard those simple, trustful words.

"I was wrong when I sought to destroy my life," said the girl presently . . . . "I know that now ; but I think the fever was in my brain . . . I could not reason calmly. I knew that Paul had gone—that the law had given him back to the wicked woman who had wrecked his life. She would follow him to England. I—I could never bear to see him again. And then I heard the flow of the river at my feet and in a moment it seemed the thought came to me, 'Death is sweeter now than any life can be ;' . . . and then I was sinking down . . . down in the cold dark water ; . . . and as I sank, suddenly a light seemed to flash across my eyes and a

great peace seemed to fill my heart, and all the fever and the pain died out, and I grew quite calm. I saw all my life before me just as if I looked into a mirror—everything I had done and thought . . . . all the mistakes—the sadness—the weariness—the hours of struggle . . . . And then I seemed to fall into a deep sleep, and when I woke I heard Noel Hill's voice . . . . After that I had but one idea . . . . to leave that place . . . . never—never to go back. I made him bring me here—at once . . . . I wanted Müller to think I was dead . . . . They found my cloak on the bank of the river next day. Noel Hill told me. We came at once to Sydney then. No one knew who I was. He managed it all. He got me some clothes and took me on board the steamer . . . . he was very kind, poor Noel . . . . I told him as much as I dared of my story, and he thinks my only hope of safety lies in concealing the fact that I still live, from Paul."

"But," said Allison, "if Paul should come back—if he should find you out?"

She shook her head. "He will not come back," she said. "They will tell him I am dead . . . . and you forget . . . . she—his wife as men call her—will have joined him in England. I do not think he will ever return here. I am sorry for Müller . . . . poor old Müller; he loved me so well, and he was so proud of me and so determined that I should be famous and great. But doubtless he will join Paul. Sometimes"—and her voice trembled, and the great tears gathered slowly in her eyes—"sometimes I hope Paul will forget . . . . and after a time be happy . . . . It is best he should believe me dead . . . . for indeed the Sheba Ormatroyd he knew *is* dead. Yes, dear Aunt Allison—to all intents and purposes dead as when she saw that ghost of her old self in the dark Yarra waters . . . . dead and buried deep in the grave of her own follies and mistakes . . . . She has nothing to do with the woman who rose from that cold river—baptized anew to the sorrows and responsibilities of life—but never more to taste its joys . . . . never—never more!"

\* \* \* \* \*

These pages only professed to give the story of Sheba Ormatroyd's girlhood. The task is finished.

If any one to whom that record of struggles, errors, doubt and suffering has appealed, cares to follow out further the life that womanhood completes, they must seek its records in some possible sequel.

THE END.



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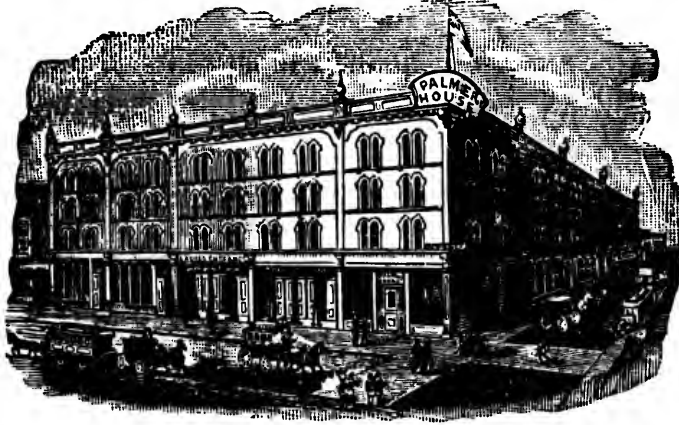
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