

The Widow's Lodger.

"And you need not expect him just yet," Dr. Hyde added. "He knows a great many people in London, business and otherwise, and I daresay he will remain a few days with his sister-in-law, the other Mrs. Allenby, in Orthorpe Square. He knows I am writing to you, so does Mr. Barker. Uncle Michael sends you his love. Mr. Barker tells you to take care of the boy; he is immensely fond of the boy, though I do not think it means a corner in his will—he is not a man of that sort."

Nothing had been further from Mary's thoughts, and she felt indignant at the suggestion.

"I think," said George's letter, in conclusion, "the other Mrs. Allenby will be rather sorry for her conduct to you. Uncle Michael knows everything from Mr. Barker, and has asked me a number of questions. I could only answer as I know, apart from it as a matter of right or wrong."

Mary was not inclined to care what Uncle Michael might think of it as a matter of right or wrong. She had taken her own independent way from the beginning, and was prepared to accept the consequence now. She did not want anything from Uncle Michael. Mary told herself, and the lady in Orthorpe Square was sure to set him against her in spite of Mr. Barker.

But the lady in Orthorpe Square was in sore tribulation. Writing from Southampton, Michael Allenby had, in a second letter, made close and particular inquiries as to Arthur's wife. He had met a friend, he said, who knew the young doctor very well indeed, and heard from him that Arthur had left, not only a widow, but a child.

"You have never mentioned this in your letters to me," Mr. Allenby wrote, "and doubtless you had your reasons for it. But knowing how fond I was of the lad, you might have informed me on a point which was sure to be of vital interest to me. I am glad, however, that he left them in such good hands as yours, otherwise the poor girl might have had to work for her own living, and work in any shape would be discreditable to a proud and wealthy name like ours."

"And what will he think," the stately lady asked of her daughters, "when he hears she is keeping a lodging-house? Who can have told him anything about her?"

"It is too late to think of that now," her eldest daughter replied. "There is nothing to be done, unless you like to go and beg her pardon; ask her to close her house, and bring herself and the baby here, as if this had been her home from the first."

"Mary would not do it," said her younger sister Margaret; "she was too deeply offended, and no wonder. Mary could never be a hypocrite—she would not do anything for money, and we have not been kind enough to make her do it for love."

Mrs. Allenby saw the force of this. She was a determined woman and in her way a proud one. She, herself, had thought of some such thing as her daughter Victoria suggested, though the suggestion was made in irony, but she had tried Mary's patient, unyielding disposition before and always failed in the contest; there was nothing for it but to stand her ground.

"I wish the girl was dead," she said, bitterly. "I wish she had died before Arthur ever saw her, she had a beggarly old father, too. They were nothing but paupers and pensioners on Arthur's generosity. She tricked him into marriage with her pretty face and pensive manners, and now, if your uncle saw her and heard her story, he would think we had ill-used her. What right had she to keep my son's boy from me?"

"She is his mother," Margaret said, quietly.

"I was Arthur's mother," was the reply. "And would I have let any selfish love of mine stand in his way? I would have resigned him, even for ever, and to the breaking of my heart; and that girl took him from me. I hate her! I hate her!"

"Just now, my dear mamma," Victoria said, sweetly, "you look as if you could put poison in her tea; but it does seem a pity she should be so thoroughly in our way. You may depend upon it, Uncle Michael will take a fancy to her, she has very winning ways, and he is sure to admire what he will consider her independent spirit, just as surely as his money will go to Arthur's boy and she will have the interest of it during her lifetime."

"Do you wish to drive me mad?" Mrs. Allenby said, turning upon her fiercely. "I have thought of these very things myself, and I could strangle her."

"So could I," said her eldest daughter, with sweet and savage stowness. "She took Arthur from you and she has taken George Hyde from me. He has not said so, but it is the truth, my dear mamma."

There was not a little of the tigress disposition in Miss Victoria, just as there was the supple tigress beauty. No two sisters could have been much more unlike than she and Margaret were. Had not the youngest lady of the Allenby family resembled Mary not a little in her quiet strength of character, she would have fared very badly indeed at the hands of those two.

"Margaret is right," Mrs. Allenby said; "that girl would not do anything for money, and we have not gone the way to win her love. I thought she would have lost her little property and been ruined by her wretched lodging-house long ago."

"Daisy is generally right," said the sweet-voiced Victoria. "For a girl so quiet and romantic, there is more com-

mon sense about her than we possess between us. I thought Mrs. Mary Allenby would have been ruined by the house long ago; and so she would but she has an excellent adviser and business man in George Hyde. Perhaps Daisy will lend us a little of her common sense. What would you advise, dear?"

"Make peace with her," Margaret said; "express that respect you ought to feel; tell her Uncle Michael is coming home, and invite her here to meet him."

"Would she come, do you think?"

"I think so."

"It would be very humiliating to be refused."

"It would be all the better," said Mrs. Allenby, "we at least should have made the first concession. Nothing would please me more than her refusal; it would be something to show my brother-in-law. Write to her, Margaret, in any term, you please, basing the letter on what you have said. Tell her I have considered it my duty, as an act of courtesy, to apprise her of Mr. Michael Allenby's return; that I regret the unfortunate circumstances which have kept us apart so long, and I invite her here to meet Arthur's uncle, with the child. Say anything else you like. Should she come, it will save all explanations; should she not come, it will give more weight to what I have done. You are a good girl, Margaret; you never let your temper run away with your judgment."

"As we do," Victoria observed. "I have to confess, my dear mamma, that Margaret is a mystery to me. She is either a saint—very nearly—or the most artful girl I ever knew. Which is it, darling?"

"Which ever you please," was the composed reply. "Which you think the most likely, considering the training I have received, and the example I have daily. Even in this—the letter I have to write—I gave my advice in pure, good faith, and you would make a most treacherous use of it. It shall be written, however, and good may come of it in a way you least expect."

The letter was written, but the girl could not write from the heart.

"Mamma desires me to tell you that Arthur's uncle, Mr. Michael Allenby, is on his way to London, and she wishes you to meet him at our house, and she very much regrets the unfortunate circumstances which have kept us apart so long."

"I should like you to come," Margaret added. "We were always friends, and I so much wish to see the darling boy. I have seen him very often when you have been out with him, but not to speak to him and kiss him. He grows like Arthur. I see the resemblance already. Do come."

She signed herself Mary's affectionate sister Margaret, and gave the letter to her mother to read. That lady passed it on to Victoria without a word.

"The first part would have kept her away, as much as if Daisy intended it," Victoria said, "the second is very clever. Yes, darling, that will do, she will either come or invite you and that will be almost as good."

"You are very ungenerous, 'Tory.'" "I am only a woman, my love, I cannot even look like a saint, you can and do."

In spite of these sarcastic interchanges, Victoria loved her sister, and would have resented a slight or an injury as bitterly as if inflicted on herself. She was to be pitied, just as much as her mother was to be blamed, for she had made her children what they were.

The answer came from Mary by return of post; in a few words and as politely as possible Mary declined, but she appended a very affectionate welcome for Margaret herself.

"We have not met since poor Arthur's death," she wrote, "but I have not forgotten your kindness then, or cared the less for you. Come and see my darling boy whenever you please, you will always be welcome; but I cannot come to your mother's house, though I forgive her with all my heart, in spite of the bitter sorrow she has caused me. You I hope will come."

"Just as I thought," Victoria said. "You will be very welcome, dear, and if mamma is wise she will let you go. But it appears to me she does not say a word of Uncle Michael."

"Not a word."

"Very strange."

"None of us know that girl yet," Mrs. Allenby said; "she may be playing some deep game of her own, or she would not be such a fool, even with her beggarly pride, as to stand in her own light and the child's. Give me that letter, Margaret, it will prove to your Uncle Michael the vindictive unforbearing spirit we have to deal with. You may go and see her when you please, it shall not be said that I left any means untried to effect a reconciliation; you may tell her that even if she will not see me I, as Arthur's mother, should like to see Arthur's boy, and perhaps she will permit you to bring him here sometimes, and say that if she thinks it more becoming our respective ages I will visit her myself."

"I will say exactly what you tell me, mamma."

"I know you will," Mrs. Allenby said, angrily, "and in the same tone and manner, if you could, but that is not what I want."

"May I go to-day?"

"This minute if you like."

"I will tell her what you say," Margaret said gently, "and soften it as far as I can, for I should like to see you reconciled. We ought to remember how Arthur loved her."

"If I could forget that," Mrs. Allenby said, "I could forgive her everything."

Margaret was very much worried and went, much to her mother's disappointment. Mary was out, but baby was at home. She could hear him in the dining-room, making enough noise for a regiment of babies, and she asked very wistfully if she might see him.

"If you do not mind going in," Martha said; "he is playing with Mr. Parker, and he is nobody—quite as big a baby as the other. Will you go in, Miss Allenby?"

"Oh, certainly!" and she opened the dining-room door.

"Here's a lady to see the baby, sir," Miss Allenby said.

"Come in," said Mr. Parker, cheerfully. He had not heard the first words, and quite misunderstood the last. "Come in, Mrs. Allenby; I don't mind you, though I look very absurd. Nothing else will suit the little man but I must sit on the floor, and pretend to play the trombone while he beats the drum. I have quite taken the place of the old gentleman upstairs, and—good gracious me!"

Nothing certainly could have been more absurd than the picture he presented, with the absurdity intensified by his dismay at the unexpected appearance of a stranger. Margaret could not help laughing, in spite of her fearful delight, as she caught Arthur's boy in her arms.

"What a donkey you must think me," said Mr. Parker, scrambling to his feet. "I thought it was Mrs. Allenby—his mamma, you know. What a donkey you must think me."

"Indeed I do not, Mr. Parker—the servant told me your name—unless to be a donkey is to love children very much, and then, I like donkeys. I am baby's auntie, and my name is Allenby, that is how the mistake arose."

"To be sure, nothing could be more natural," said Mortimer Pestlethwaite, whose senses had gone on a wool-gathering expedition. "Pray sit down and make yourself at home. Mrs. Allenby will not be long. Would you like a cup of tea if you wouldn't mind? I have some apricot jam and biscuits, and several things, if I knew where to find them, but the little fellow has put the key of the chiffonier somewhere—in the fire, I think."

"Will you give me a cup of tea?" said Margaret, anxious to put the poor fellow at his ease. "I should like it very much."

"How delightful," and he rang the bell. "Some tea please, Martha. The boy quite takes to you, Miss Allenby, so he does to me; but there is no one like the old gentleman upstairs. It is really very good of you to take a cup of tea. You do not know how delighted am."

And Mr. Parker was very far from knowing the good impression he had made on Margaret. She saw the simple, chivalrous good nature under the surface of his nervousness, and he improved greatly on acquaintance. He went into the next room, smoothed his tumbled hair, settled his collar and tie, and changed his study coat for one more presentable. By the time he had done this the tray was on the table. Baby settled the apricot jam delicately by producing the chiffonier key from beneath the hearthrug.

He had taken to Margaret, but he did not understand her yet. He gave her a vast amount of unintelligible information concerning "Boko," who lived, if his tiny finger was to be believed, somewhere in the ceiling. He patted her face and said "poor" when he saw the tears in her eyes, and let her give him as many kisses as she chose; but on the whole, there was his playmate on the apricot jam side of the table, and after a very brief consultation with himself the little fellow clambered over to him. Up to this period of his career Master Arthur evinced a decided preference for his own sex.

Mr. Parker had never enjoyed himself so much. Miss Allenby put him so delightfully at his ease. She had the rare quality of tact, the cultivated instinct of a fine, delicate, and generous nature. She led him by degrees to talk of his own profession, the house he lived in, his fellow lodger, and Mary. Margaret learned that Mary was his idea of perfection, that his fellow lodger was an extraordinary combination of contradictions, that the house he lived in was the dearest spot on earth, and that his professional hopes were modest to a degree, but he was confident in a quiet way.

"I shall make a position in twenty years or so," he said; "and if I can pay my expenses in the meantime, it is all I have a right to expect. The house physician is very kind and encouraging. Sometimes I despond, and feel afraid that I have mistaken my vocation."

"That is a good sign, Mr. Parker. I read somewhere, quite recently, that no man ever yet attained greatness in his profession who had not suffered from that despondent feeling—a doubt of his own worthiness and power. It may not be a proof of genius, but it shows at least that he has higher aims—a desire to do his best."

"How very kind of you to say so; you give me a confidence in myself that I only have when Mrs. Allenby talks to me. I think it is so nice of her to give me a few minutes when she thinks I am dull."

"You would be dull sometimes; but have you no friends in London?"

"Dear me, no! All the men of my own age are so dreadfully wild, it would kill me in a week to go on as they do."

"You want companionship of a better sort," said Margaret. "It will be different when you are in a position of your own, and have some one to care for you."

"I am not the kind of man to be cared for," said Mr. Parker, shaking his head; "and if anyone did care for me, we should have to wait a great many years. I am one of a large family, you see, Miss Allenby, and the youngest I could expect or accept would be to be set up in a house or apartments, and kept going for a year. I am painfully conscious of my own defects, and I cannot care them. I am not the kind of man to be cared for."

"Do not let the habit of self-disparagement grow upon you," Margaret said, with kindly sympathy; "your time will come, as it does to other men. Of course you know the beautiful old superstition that every soul is created with its twin?"

"Yes, and they wander about in search of one another and perhaps never meet."

"Hope and try to believe that yours will," said Margaret, and the conversation might have been prolonged in the same strain had not the baby, thinking he looked rather sad, tried to soothe him with a spoonful of apricot jam and just then Mary came in.

The two girls had always loved each other, and Mr. Parker felt his own eyes fill as he witnessed the tearful pleasure of their meeting; but the tears were soon over with Mary—she had long since learned to keep down the outward

(To be continued.)

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