

ADA CAMBRIDGE

A MERE
CHANCE: A
NOVEL. VOL. 3

Ada Cambridge

A Mere Chance: A Novel. Vol. 3

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CHAPTER I. A PARABLE

IT was about a month after the foregoing conversation took place, that Melbourne society was fluttered by a rumour that the engagement between Mr. Kingston and Miss Fetherstonhaugh, which had been unaccountably broken off, was "on" again, and that the long-delayed wedding was to take place immediately. Rumour for once in the way, was perfectly correct.

People went to call at Toorak, and found the aunt serene and radiant, and the bride-elect wearing all the honours of her position – not shyly as of yore, but with a quiet candour and dignified self-possession that was not generally considered becoming under the circumstances.

It was thought that a little humility would be proper in a young person who was going to enjoy such altogether undeserved good fortune.

It happened while she was staying at South Yarra. *How* it happened nobody quite knew. Gossip attributed it to Mrs. Reade's manœuvres; but Mrs. Reade, far from encouraging anything of the sort, set herself steadily against it, and warned Mr. Kingston of probable consequences in the most terse and trenchant manner (she had taken a very different view of the situation since her return from Adelonga).

Gossip likewise attributed it to the seductions of the new house, which was beginning to shadow forth in Palladio-gingerbread of the most ambitious pattern, the magnificence of the establishment that was to be; but gossip was equally misinformed in this respect.

Rachel was as ready as ever to admire the house, and the beautiful tiles, and carvings, and hangings, and upholstery, that were constantly being designed and produced for its adornment; she fully understood how much they represented for whoever was to possess and enjoy them. But they had not a featherweight of value in her eyes as compared with the happiness she had hoped for and lost; they did not suggest the idea of compensation or consolation in even a slight degree. The fact was that Mr. Kingston was determined to have her.

Of late he had seemed – not to Rachel, but to Mrs. Reade – to have a sort of half-sullen doggedness in his determination, indicating that he was as much bent upon winning the game as upon winning the stakes – that he meant, before all things, not to be beaten in the enterprise upon which he had set his heart.

And in this frame of mind he waited upon opportunity; and in the end, opportunity, as so often happens in such cases, served him.

One day Beatrice and her husband went out of town to lunch, and Rachel had a long, lonely afternoon. It came on to rain, and it was grey and chilly. Dull weather always sent her spirits down several degrees below the normal temperature, and just now she was morbidly sensitive to its influence.

If Beatrice had been at home there would have been a fire in no time, summer though it was; in her absence Rachel did not like to take upon herself to order one. She lay on a sofa with a shawl over her feet, and listened to the rain pattering on the window, and felt cold, and dismal, and deserted.

At five o'clock she was pining for her tea, and thinking it had been forgotten, rang for it; and the smart young parlour-maid, interrupted in an interesting *tête-à-tête* with the next door coachman, and blessed with few opportunities for the indulgence of a naturally restive temper, brought it in with a protesting *nonchalance*, a teapotful of nasty liquid, made with water that had not boiled, and a couple

of slices of bread and butter that would have charmed a hungry schoolboy – such as would never have been presented to the mistress of the house, as Rachel well knew.

This small indignity, so very small as it was, greatly aggravated the vague sense of desolation and orphanhood – the feeling that she was a person of no consequence to anybody – which possessed her just now. And while she was in the lowest depths of despondency, in the deepest indigo of blues, Mr. Kingston calling, discovered her solitude and came in, tenderly deferential, full of solicitude for her health and comfort, stooping from his higher sphere of social importance to pay homage to her still in her forlorn insignificance.

For the space of half-an-hour perhaps she felt that it would be good to be married to somebody – to anybody – who would love and take care of her, and make the servants treat her with proper respect; and a mere chance enabled Mr. Kingston to take advantage of that accident.

Looking back afterwards she never could understand how it was that she had felt disposed to re-accept him; but the causes were as distinct as causes usually are. Badly-made tea, and the want of a fire in dull weather are, amongst the multifarious factors of human destiny, greatly underrated.

Having said the fatal "yes" – or, rather, having failed at the proper moment to say "no," which Mr. Kingston justly took to mean the same thing – Rachel was allowed no more opportunities for what her aunt called "shilly-shallying."

The day of the marriage was fixed at once, and the preparations for her trousseau simultaneously set on foot.

The girl had hardly come to realise the extraordinary thing that she had done when she found herself being measured for all sorts of wearing apparel, and consulted about the arrangements for her honeymoon tour. Then she set herself to do her duty in the state of life to which she imagined herself "called," with a kind of hopeless resignation. She recognised the fact that this second mistake was not revocable like the first; and therefore she understood that it was not to be considered a mistake.

All her life and energy now had to be dedicated to the task of making it justifiable to her own conscience and in the eyes of all men.

And so she was sweet and gentle to her affianced husband, promising him that, though she could not love him first and best, if he was content to have her as she was (and he assured her he was quite content), she would do all in her power to prove herself a good and true wife to him; and she was tractable and obedient in the hands of her aunt, and ready to fall in with all the arrangements that were made for her.

But, as the wedding-day drew near, the dread of it showed itself to Mrs. Reade, if to no one else, in the dumb eloquence of the sensitive, truth-telling face. That little person who had such a talent for managing, stood aside at this crisis, and did not intermeddle with the strange course of events.

In none of the affairs that she had promoted and directed and brought to successful terminations, had she taken such a deep and painful interest as she now felt in this, which she had been powerless to control; but, for the first time in her life, she was afraid to speak to her young cousin of the thoughts that both their minds were full of, lest she might be called upon to advise where she found it was impossible to decide what was for the best, and only waited helplessly upon Fate, like an ordinary incapable woman.

On the night before the wedding – a soft, bright, early autumn night – Rachel gave her a distinct intimation if she had wanted it, that the marriage however it might turn out eventually, was by no means undertaken as marriages should be.

The girl stole away from the drawing-room while the others were temporarily absorbed in the preparations that were going on for the great ceremonial, and Mrs. Reade, hunting for her anxiously, found her standing in the moonlight by the kitchen-garden gate.

"Looking at that house again!" the little woman exclaimed. "Why, you must know every stick and stone by heart. I never miss you that I don't find you here."

"I am like our poor Jenny and the tank," said Rachel, gazing still at the imposing pile before her, sharply black and white against the soft light of the sky.

"Who is Jenny, may I ask?"

"A dear cat we used to have. She fell into a deep tank one day when father and I were not at home, and for two days she was struggling at the edge of the water clinging to a bit of brickwork, and no one came to help her. Some men heard her cries, but did not know where she was. As soon as we came home, of course I found it all out; and I got a large bough of wattle and lowered it down, and so she was saved when she was very nearly gone. Oh, poor thing, what a state she was in! I sat up with her all night. But she never got over it. She was not exactly mad, but she was never in her right mind afterwards."

"Well?" said Mrs. Reade who was greatly mystified. "I can't see the drift of your allegory so far."

"No; I was going to tell you. Ever after this happened, we had to keep a constant watch upon her to prevent her from throwing herself into the tank again. If she heard the sound of the lid being moved, she would rush to it in a sort of frenzy. A bricklayer was doing something to it one day, and we had to lock her up, she was in such a frantic state. She would be gentle and quiet at other times, but as soon as she thought the lid was being opened, she got quite mad to go to it. And at last a new servant, who did not know of this, left the lid off one day, and poor Jenny seized her chance, and jumped in and drowned herself."

"And that is your well, you mean?" said Mrs. Reade, pointing to the house. "And you are immolating yourself, like Jenny? Oh, Rachel, what are you talking about!"

"I am talking nonsense, I know," said Rachel, with an impressive air of artificial composure; "but somehow Jenny happened to come into my head. Beatrice, do you know I have been thinking of something."

"Of what? Oh, dear me, I wish to goodness you would think like a sensible girl, who knew her own mind sometimes."

"I have been thinking what I ought to do. I ought to just put on my hat and jacket and run away. I could go to a friend, a poor widow, who used to be very kind to me in the old days, and she would let me stay with her until I could get a situation. No, don't scold me – it is ten o'clock, isn't it? It is too late for a girl to be out at night alone. I *can't* do it, if I would."

"And would you, indeed if you could?" demanded Mrs. Reade, holding her by her wrists and looking imploringly into her face. "Do you really mean that you have a mind to do such a thing, Rachel?"

Rachel was silent for a few seconds and then she began to cry bitterly.

"Oh, I don't know – I don't know!" she said, turning her head wildly from side to side. "Sometimes I feel one way and sometimes another. I want somebody – somebody strong, like Roden – to tell me what it is right to do!"

For a moment Mrs. Reade weighed the merits of the proposition, and all that lay against it, with as near an approach to impartial judgment as true friendship and human fallibility allowed. And the thought of Rachel's weakness of purpose and inability to take care of herself, and of Mr. Dalrymple's traditional character, turned the scale.

"You cannot go back *now*," she said. "My darling, you have doubly given yourself to Mr. Kingston, and you must try to make yourself happy with him – much can be done by trying, if you will only make up your mind!"

It was the last chance that Rachel had, and she accepted the fate that deprived her of it with characteristic meekness.

"Yes, I will try," she said, wiping her eyes. "It is too late to go back now."

CHAPTER II. "WHEN YULE IS COLD."

RACHEL, when she did at last get married, had a very stately wedding, if that was any comfort to her. The weather was beautiful, to begin with; a lovelier autumn morning even Australia could not have furnished, to be an omen of good luck for the future years.

Each of the eight young Melbourne belles who had been invited to assist at the interesting ceremony took care to point out the significance of sunshine and a cloudless sky when offering their congratulations to the bride and to the bridegroom also.

The bridegroom on this occasion by no means filled the humble office which tradition and custom assigned to him. There was not a bridesmaid of them all who did not feel that she was much more Mr. Kingston's bridesmaid than Mrs. Kingston's.

Not only were they better acquainted and on more friendly terms generally with him than with her, but he had far more to say to them, and practically far more to do with them, in the course of the day and in the discharge of his and their official duties.

He was the prince of bridegrooms, indeed. He had made magnificent settlements upon his wife (though the credit of that really belonged to Mr. Hardy, who, for once in a way, had to be reckoned with in the progress of these arrangements); and his wedding presents were on an equally noble scale.

The bridesmaids' bracelets were solid evidences of his worth in every sense of the term, and inasmuch as each bracelet slightly differed from the rest, though all were equally costly, of the excellence of his taste and tact. They were valued thereafter by their respective recipients rather as parting keepsakes from their bachelor friend than as mementoes of his auspicious marriage.

And the diamond necklace that was his special wedding-day gift to his bride, and which lay just under the ruffled lace encircling her white throat – a dazzling ring of shifting lights and colours – a magnet to the eyes of all spectators – was worthy to have been a gift from Solomon to the Queen of Sheba.

There was not a servant in the house, nor near it, who did not receive some token of the princely fashion in which he improved this great occasion, and who did not participate in the general impression that he more than rivalled, in popularity and importance, the beautiful young lady whom he had won.

Of the company, all were charmed with his gaiety, his affability, and his delightful *sang-froid*. He was never for a moment embarrassed. He overflowed with airy courtesies, not only to his bride, but to all her maids and friends.

He made a brilliant speech, that exactly hit the happy medium between tearful pathos and unfeeling jocularly, and that was full of well-bred witticisms, provocative of gentle, well-bred laughter. He was, in short, all that a bridegroom ought to be, and so very seldom is. He covered himself with honour.

Rachel, on the contrary, seemed to have been mesmerised into temporary lifelessness. It was expected that she would be shy and fluttered, and bathed in blushes; but she was not agitated at all, and she did not blush at all. She bore herself generally with a statuesque composure that was thought by some to be very dignified, and by others very wooden and stupid, and that was a little depressing to witness from either point of view. From the beginning of the day she wore this unnatural calmness.

Mrs. Reade had been in terror lest she should give way to unbecoming excitement at some stage of the ceremonies, and was prepared to combat the first symptoms of hysteria with such material and moral remedies as were most likely to be efficacious.

She had strictly enjoined Lucilla, who had brought the baby to the wedding, not to let that irresistible child appear upon any account, and bidden her restrict herself to the most perfunctory

caresses until the public ordeal was over. But long ere this point was reached the little woman was longing to see some signs of the emotional weakness that she had deprecated, and there were none.

The bride was as beautiful as a sculptor's ideal, but as cold as the marble which dimly embodies it. She had apparently nerved herself for a sacrificial rite, or else the greatness of her suffering had numbed her; or she was calm with resignation and despair.

"I wish," said Mrs. Reade to herself, in the middle of the marriage service, "I wish I had stopped it last night. I have made a mistake."

But as this thought occurred to her, she was standing – a splendid little figure in ruby velvet and antique lace – in the midst of scores of other splendid figures, a helpless witness to the irrevocable consummation of her mistake, which after all was less hers than anybody's.

Rachel had given her "troth" to her husband, and he was putting the ring that was the sign and seal of it – the token and pledge of the solemn vow and covenant betwixt them made – upon her finger.

When the breakfast was over, that domestic pendant to the religious ceremony having "gone off" with great success, Mrs. Kingston, in due course, retired to put on her travelling dress.

The bridesmaids proper were dispensed with at this stage, and the two married cousins went upstairs with the bride.

It was Beatrice now who was tender and caressing; Lucilla, who did not see very far below the surface of anything, and was delighted with the pomp and circumstance of this new alliance in the family, and charmed, like all happy matrons, to welcome a new comer into the matrimonial ranks, overflowed with unwonted gaiety.

"Now we are *all* married!" she exclaimed, sinking upon a sofa in Rachel's room, and looking very fair and young – as if marriage had thoroughly agreed with her – in a pale blue French dress of the highest fashion. "And we have all married so well, haven't we? And we have all got such good husbands. Oh, how nice it will be when Rachel and Laura come back and begin housekeeping! John is going to let me have a house in town, too, as soon as Isabel and Bruce come home, so that we shall be down for part of the year; and then what a cosy little family circle we shall make! But Rachel will be at the head of us all. Ah, dear child, you will know now how nice it is to be a married woman – to have your own husband with you always – such a delightful, attentive husband, too, as I know he will be – and your own home – such a beautiful home –"

"You lock up her diamonds, Lucilla," Mrs. Reade interrupted, handing the starry necklace to her sister. "And, Rachel, dear, don't stand and tire yourself. Sit down, and let me dress you."

Rachel, when her bridal lace and satin had been taken off, sat down to be sponged and brushed, and to have her travelling boots laced up.

Beatrice performed her lady's-maid offices in silence, while Lucilla handed her what she wanted, and pleasantly chatted on; and when all was done, and the bride, in russet homespun, was ready for her departure, there were a few words whispered that Mrs. Thornley did not hear.

"My darling, you *said* you would try."

"Yes, Beatrice, dear; yes, I am trying."

"You are not finding it very hard – too hard – are you?"

"It will be easier in a little while."

"If you make an effort, Rachel – if you make up your mind – if you are kind and good to your husband, and try to keep him straight, and to make his home happy –"

"Yes, dear; yes. I am going to do all I can. But to-day I can only feel that I have lost —*quite* lost – Roden. I feel now as if he were dead. Even the memory of him I must not comfort myself with any more. That is what I feel hard. But I am trying to get over it. I have promised Mr. Kingston – Graham – all those solemn promises, and I *must* keep them – I will. It is only at first that I don't know how to bear it; but it will be easier by-and-bye. We must not talk about it, Beatrice; it is wrong to talk about it now. And, oh! I do so dread that I shall break down."

She did break down at last. When she descended the staircase into the hall she found all the company awaiting her, the front door open, and the carriage that was to take her away being packed with her travelling bags and wraps.

She shook hands with all the guests, and smiled a gentle response to their congratulatory farewells; she shook hands with John and his fellow-servants; she kissed her uncle and thanked him for all his kindness to her; she embraced Lucilla and Beatrice with silent fervour, and then her stately aunt, to whom she repeated her grateful acknowledgements for the home and care that had been given her.

"I am afraid I have not made much return to you for your goodness to me, dear Aunt Elizabeth," she said, with pathetic earnestness, but with no agitation of voice or manner.

To her intense surprise the majestic woman suddenly burst into tears.

"Oh, my child!" she said, tenderly, "I hope I have been as good an aunt to you as you have been a good niece to me. I hope you will be very, very happy, my darling. If you are not, I shall never forgive myself."

Mr. Kingston, of course, was standing by, and a frown fell like a cloud over his face. Mrs. Reade was also standing by, and she looked at him steadily for a few seconds with clear, bright eyes.

"Come, Rachel," he said, and he only looked at his wife; "we shall lose our train if we don't make haste."

Rachel withdrew herself from her aunt's arms, and Mr. Kingston took her by the hand and led her away, followed from the house to her carriage by all her train. She was a good deal shaken by the little incident that had so unexpectedly occurred.

There was no mystery to her in what Mrs. Hardy had said, but the thing she had done was very strange and very touching. It invested the Toorak House and all its belongings with a new charm that the orphan girl had never felt before with all the kindness that she had enjoyed there.

At no time in the fourteen or fifteen months that she had lived in it had it seemed so much her "home" as at this moment, when her aunt cried like a mother at parting from her – so desirable a place to stay in now that she had to go.

"Well," said Mr. Kingston, when the carriage was fairly out of the Hardy grounds, and he had waved a gracious adieu with the tips of his fingers to the woman at the lodge, who stood in her Sunday best and white satin cap-ribbons, smiling and curtsying, to see them pass; "well, that is a good thing over, isn't it? Of all the senseless institutions of this world, a wedding *à la mode* is about the most preposterous. You look knocked up already, when you ought to be fresh for your travels."

He spoke with a little nervous irritation, and Rachel did not answer him. Her heart was beating very fast, beating in her ears and in her throat, as well as in the place where its active operations were usually carried on.

All her powers were concentrated upon a desperate effort to postpone that breaking-down which she had dreaded, and which she felt was inevitable, until she could shut herself within four walls again. But she could not postpone it.

Her husband took her hand and asked her what was the matter with her – whether she felt ill, or whether she was regretting after all that she had married him; whether she was going to make him happy, as she had promised, or to curse his life with its bitterest disappointment – speaking half in love, half in anger, with a sudden outburst of protesting entreaty provoked by her irresponsive silence. And she began to cry – almost to scream – in the most violent and alarming manner.

"My dear love! my sweet child!" cried the bridegroom, aghast. "I did not mean to vex you, Rachel. I did not mean to blame you, my pet. Rachel, Rachel, hush! do hush! Don't let that confounded coachman go back and say – Rachel, do you hear?" – giving her a little shake – "there are people passing. For Heaven's sake don't make a scene in the street, whatever you do!"

Rachel was almost beside herself with excitement, but she was awake to the indecency of betraying her emotion to the servants and the passers-by. Moreover, something in her husband's voice steadied her.

By a strong effort she checked the headlong impulse to rave and scream that for a few seconds was almost overpowering, and held herself in with shut teeth and tight-locked hands, wildly sobbing under her breath, and by-and-bye, when the first rush of passion had spent itself, she became quiet and tractable, fortunately, before they reached the railway-station.

Mr. Kingston was terribly shocked and outraged by this behaviour. He would have given anything to be able to scold her – in a gentle and judicious manner, of course – but he was afraid to attempt such a thing, or even to speak of the probable causes that had led to such deplorable impropriety.

He rummaged for his spirit-flask, and made her drink a few drops of brandy, which nearly choked her; he found some eau-de-Cologne and bathed her face; he got her to put on a thicker veil, which happened to be amongst the luxuries that her aunt and cousins had stuffed into her travelling-bag; and he kissed her and petted her, and when she attempted to explain and excuse herself, bade her "Hush! till another time," and would not listen to her.

His immediate anxiety was to restore her personal appearance and her powers of self-command. The more important matters could wait. And he succeeded in his efforts; she did not break down any more.

Their journey that day was not very far. An hour or two in the train, and then half a dozen miles in a comfortable covered buggy, and they reached the country house which had been placed at their disposal – the best substitute to be had for that charming residence on the shores of the bay at Sydney – where they were to spend two or three weeks in their own society before starting by the next mail to Europe.

As they were driving through the silent bush, in the dusk of that autumn day, and the bridegroom, wrapped in his fur-collared overcoat, was musing not very happily upon the success that had crowned his long-cherished hopes and plans, his young wife slipped her hand under his arm, and laid her cheek upon his coat-sleeve.

"Graham," she whispered softly.

He turned round quickly, and took her in his arms. It was the first time she had spoken his name and offered him a caress voluntarily, and he was greatly touched and cheered.

"Will you forgive me?" she said, not shrinking away from his embrace, but creeping into it as she had never done before. "And, oh, will you love me, in spite of it all?"

"Love you!" he echoed, tenderly. "My sweet, I have always loved you more than anybody in the world, and I always shall. It will not be on *my* side that love will be wanting."

She said no more, but she lay still, with her head in its soft little sealskin cap on his breast, as if she liked to feel his arms about her.

It was so new to him, and so immeasurably delightful. He had never expected to feel happier (even on his wedding day) than he felt now, with his best beloved, who had been so impracticable, his own at last, giving herself up to him in this way.

Poor, parasitic little heart, full of spreading tendrils! It was essential to its very existence that it should have *something* to cling to – which was a view of the case, that happily did not chance to strike him.

CHAPTER III. A DISCOVERY

THERE was a great ball at Toorak on the night of the wedding, and like all the nuptial ceremonies, it went off with great *éclat*.

Mrs. Hardy recovered her serenity very quickly after the bride's departure, and appeared in the evening, clothed in smiles and sapphire velvet, looking the proud woman that it was generally conceded she had a right to be. Lucilla, at home for the first time since her sister Laura's wedding, and since her accession to the dignities of maternity, and carrying herself very prettily as a personage of consequence amongst the unmarried friends of her girlhood, looked extremely well and very happy, and reflected great honour upon her family in a variety of ways. Beatrice also was unusually brilliant, not only in her personal appearance, but in her mode of discharging the duties of the occasion – a little too much so, indeed, if anything.

Some elderly ladies, and a very few young men, were subsequently heard to express an opinion that she carried that sharp and satirical manner of hers to an excess that was unbecoming in a person of her sex and years, even if she had married money and become a leader of fashion.

A little after midnight, these two young women, the one for the sake of her baby, and the other on account of her husband, excused themselves from further attendance on Mrs. Hardy, and drove back to South Yarra, where the Thornleys were staying, carrying their willing lords along with them.

When they reached home, where of course they found bright fires ready for them, the men retired to the smoking-room, Mrs. Reade having laid upon her brother-in-law the responsibility of keeping his host from getting "any worse than he was already," and the ladies went upstairs to Lucilla's apartment.

Lucilla having only arrived in town the day before, she and her sister had had no opportunity for what they called a good talk; and now the baby being found asleep and in his nurse's charge for the night, they sat down to begin it, having previously got rid of ball-room finery and made themselves comfortable in their dressing-gowns.

"Does Ned often get – a – like this?" Mrs. Thornley began, with a compassionate inflection in her soft voice. She knew of course that one couldn't expect everything, but still she was sorry that her sister's excellent marriage should have this particular drawback, than which she could hardly imagine one more unpleasant and embarrassing, and that a nice fellow like Ned, with a noble pedigree and the sweetest temper in the world, should take his social pleasures as a shearer would celebrate pay-day.

Mrs. Reade was thinking, at the same moment, that John was ageing very fast and getting immensely stout, and that his manner of addressing his wife, and his bearing towards her generally, was more peremptory and dictatorial than *she* would feel inclined to put up with if she were in Lucilla's place.

"Oh, no," said the little woman, sharply; "it is only on these festive occasions, when I am not able to look after him properly. And at the worst he is not very bad. He never gets obstinate and quarrelsome, as some men do – only vaguely argumentative and subsequently sleepy. I should think no husband, with so pronounced a tendency that way could be easier to manage – if one knows how to manage."

"You were always a splendid manager, Beatrice."

"Well, I just hold him well in hand – that's all. I know he can't help it, to a certain extent, so I don't keep always worrying at him about it. It is only now and then that I give him a real good talking to – to prevent his thinking I might grow indifferent, as much as anything."

"He is such a dear, good fellow," said Lucilla, "but for that."

"He is a dear, good fellow, in spite of that," replied Beatrice, who allowed no one but herself to disparage her husband. "He is better worth having, with all his faults – and that is about the only one he has – than most of your brilliant society men. I only hope Mr. Kingston will be as little trouble to Rachel as Ned has been to me – and half as good and kind to her."

"Yes, dear. I didn't mean to say that he wasn't the best of husbands – far from it. Indeed, we may both be thankful for our good luck in that respect – all of us, I should say. I should think no four girls in one family are more happily situated than we are."

"I hope so," sighed Mrs. Reade. "I hope we are all as happy as – as we are well off otherwise."

"Dear little Rachel!" said Mrs. Thornley, musingly. "I don't think there is any doubt about her being happy. It is quite extraordinary to see how fond of her Mr. Kingston is —*really* fond of her, I mean. Did you think he would ever marry such a young girl, Beatrice? and be so terribly anxious to do it, too? I didn't. I suppose it was her beauty captivated him."

"No," said Beatrice; "it was the fact that she didn't want to captivate him. That has been her charm all along – he has felt that his honour was concerned in making her, and it has been a difficult task."

"Oh, but I know he thinks a great deal about beauty, and she is really the prettiest girl in Melbourne, I do think, though she does belong to us. She did not look so pretty to-day though, as I expected she would. That dead-white in the morning that brides have to wear does spoil even the best complexion. I thought hers could stand anything, but it can't stand that. When she wears it in the evening, now – not dead-white, but transparent white – she is a perfect picture. At that ball of ours last year everybody was talking of her. She was in Indian muslin. John said she was like a wood anemone."

Mrs. Reade was gazing thoughtfully into the fire. The mention of the ball at Adelonga stirred many troubled thoughts. The real importance of that event, in its effect upon Rachel, had never been known to Mrs. Thornley, who was led to suppose that the suspension of Mr. Kingston's engagement in October was solely due to certain laxities on his part, which the girl would not condone.

Mrs. Hardy's terror lest "people" should get to know that a member of her family had had any dealings of a compromising nature with such a person as she considered Mr. Dalrymple to be had been the cause of this extreme reticence.

A general impression prevailed amongst the guests who had attended the ball, that the handsome ex-hussar had admired the belle of the evening to an extent that had roused the wrath of her *fiancé* against him; but no one, strange to say, had been able to discover more than that.

Mr. Dalrymple himself never had confidantes in these matters; and Mr. Kingston, when he was enlightened at Christmas, was as little desirous as Mrs. Hardy that the facts of the case should be published. Beatrice and Rachel, who alone discussed them freely, did so with the strictest secrecy.

Mrs. Reade had no confidential intercourse with her mother, as of yore, on the subject of her cousin's welfare. They had jointly resolved, just before the younger lady set out for her summer visit to Adelonga, that it would be safer to exclude Lucilla (as a married woman who told her husband everything) from any participation in the knowledge of the mischief that Mr. Dalrymple had done, and of Rachel's unfortunate infatuation for him – which did not seem so very serious at that time; and since then his name had scarcely been mentioned between them.

Now, however, the anxious little woman, with a load of care that she was by no means used to weighing on her heart, was impelled to take advantage of the opportunity offered by Lucilla's reference to that momentous ball to put a question that had suddenly become to herself, tormentingly importunate.

"Has anything been heard of that Mr. Dalrymple lately?"

"Oh, yes," said Lucilla; "he is gradually getting better."

"Getting better!" echoed Beatrice, sharply. "Why, what is the matter with him? Is he ill?"

"Didn't you hear? He had a dreadful accident. He was breaking-in a young horse that was very wild, and it bucked him off, or did something, and he fell on his head. It is a wonder he didn't break

his neck. No one saw it happen, for he was away on the plains by himself, and it was only when he did not come home at night that Mr. Gordon went to look for him. They were a long time finding him, and he had been there for hours, and he was quite insensible. There were some wild dogs sniffing at him, as if he were really dead. Indeed, Mr. Gordon said, if they hadn't found him when they did, the dingoes would probably have made an end of him. Was it not dreadful?"

Mrs. Reade was staring at the fire, not displaying that interest in the narrative that its tragic details demanded, apparently.

"When did it happen?" she asked quietly, without lifting her eyes.

"Oh, some time ago – in December. We did not hear of it until January. But he is only now able to get out of bed and crawl about, poor fellow. He was dreadfully hurt. His brain was affected, and the summer weather in that hot place was so much against him. And, of course, he couldn't have what he wanted up there, and was too bad to be moved. Mrs. Digby went there to nurse him – the Hales took the children for her. It was enough to kill her, so delicate as she is; but she would go. She idolises him almost. Mr. Digby went with her, and stayed till the worst was over. And Mr. Gordon was most devoted – he went all the way to Melbourne to consult the doctors there about him, travelling night and day."

"Were there no doctors nearer than Melbourne?"

"Yes, of course; they had two. But he wanted the best opinions. He is Mr. Dalrymple's partner, you know, and they were old friends before they came out here."

"And did Mr. Dalrymple seem to be any better after he got the Melbourne prescriptions?"

"No; it was not a case where doctors could do much. He seemed to rally a little while Mr. Gordon was away, but he had a bad relapse afterwards. The weather became frightfully hot, and the fever of course got worse. He was delirious for a whole fortnight, and then he was so low that he just seemed sinking. However, he must be an amazingly strong man naturally. He managed to struggle through it, and now he is getting about, and all danger is over, though Mrs. Digby says he is like a walking skeleton. I expect she will have brought him home with her by the time we go back; he will soon get well when she has him in her own house. I shall go over and see him," added Lucilla, compassionately; "and I shall ask him to come to Adelonga, as soon as he is strong enough, and let *me* nurse him for a few weeks."

Mrs. Reade had before her mind's eye that photograph which her sister had shown her in Mrs. Digby's house. She saw every lineament of the powerful, impressive face distinctly – even in a photograph it was not a face that once looked at, could be forgotten; and she pictured to herself the changes that months of wasting illness would have made in it.

A warm rush of indignant pity, mingled with something near akin to admiration, filled her heart, which was wont to indulge itself in womanly weaknesses – an impulse to champion and befriend this man of so kingly a presence, whose sins, whatever they were, were balanced with so many misfortunes. And yet for a moment she could not help regretting that his fall from his horse had not broken his neck.

Ned, guiltily creeping into his dressing-room about half an hour later, never had the fumes of superfluous champagne dispersed from his brain so quickly. He saw his wife sitting by her own fireside, with her feet on the fender and her face in her hands, crying – actually crying – like any common woman.

CHAPTER IV.

"TO MEET MR. AND MRS. KINGSTON."

RACHEL was away for nearly a year and a half, seeing all the kingdoms of the earth and the glory of them in the most luxurious modern fashion. It was such a tour as a romantic and imaginative woman born to a humdrum life would feel to be the one thing to "do" and die; and according to her account, she enjoyed it extremely. She came home very much improved by it in the opinion of her aunt and other good judges.

"Certainly," they said, "travel is the very best education: there is nothing like it for enlarging the mind, and for giving polish and repose to the manners."

Mrs. Kingston, indeed, when she took her place in the society of which her husband had long been so distinguished an ornament, was a very interesting study, as exemplifying this soundest of popular theories. She was greatly altered in all sorts of ways. She had quite lost that bashful rusticity which had been Mrs. Hardy's despair, and in her unpretentious fashion, was really very dignified.

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