

ADA CAMBRIDGE

A MERE
CHANCE: A
NOVEL. VOL. 2

Ada Cambridge

A Mere Chance: A Novel. Vol. 2

«Public Domain»

Cambridge A.

A Mere Chance: A Novel. Vol. 2 / A. Cambridge — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I.	5
CHAPTER II.	9
CHAPTER III.	12
CHAPTER IV.	17
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

A Mere Chance: A Novel. Vol. 2

CHAPTER I. ANOTHER RASH PROMISE

MR. KINGSTON, as soon as he received Mrs. Thornley's invitation, sent a telegram to her nearest post-town, to tell her he would start for Adelonga on the following day, and await at the inn where he left the railway the buggy she was kind enough to say should be sent to meet him.

There was much amusement at Adelonga over this unwonted promptitude on the part of an idle and self-indulgent man, who had never been known to hurry himself, or to go into the country willingly; and Rachel was teased in fun and congratulated in earnest on the strong hold she had gained upon his erewhile erratic affections.

The buggy was ordered at once – Mr. Thornley's own pet Abbott buggy, that floated over the rough roads – and a pet pair of horses were harnessed into it, and another pair sent forward to change with them on the way, and Mr. Thornley himself set forth to meet his guest.

Next day Lucilla ordered one of her best rooms – usually reserved for married ladies – to be prepared for him, and had great consultations with her cook on his behalf; and at about five in the afternoon he arrived, wrapped in a fur-collared overcoat, like a traveller in bleak and barren regions, and had a royal welcome.

Lucilla, followed by her mother, went out to the verandah to meet her old friend – though, indeed, she never willingly omitted that graceful act of hospitality, whoever might be her guest – and was delighted to receive again the same old compliment on her charming appearance that had pleasantly befooled her in her maiden days. Mrs. Hardy was likewise greeted with effusion, and responded cordially; and then they all looked round.

"Where is Rachel?" inquired Mr. Kingston, with anxious solicitude; "isn't she well?"

Rachel was found in the drawing-room, nervously rearranging the cups and saucers that had just been brought in for tea. Lucilla ushered him in with a smile, and discreetly retired with her mother, upon some utterly unnecessary errand.

The lovers met in the middle of the room, and Rachel went through the ordeal that she had been vaguely dreading all day. It was worse than she had expected, for she felt, by some subtle, newly-developed sense, that she had been greatly missed and ardently longed for, and that they were truly lover's arms that folded her, trembling and shrinking, in that apparently interminable embrace.

She had not yet come to realise the magnitude and the ignominy of the wrong that she was doing him, but a pang of remorseful pity did hurt her somewhere, through all her stony irresponsiveness, for the fate that had driven him, the desired of so many women, to set his heart at last upon one who did not want it.

For a brief intolerable moment she felt that she had it in her to implore him to release her from her engagement, but – well, she was a little coward, if the truth must be told.

And, moreover, she had not quite come to the point of giving up her pink boudoir, and her diamond necklace, and all her other splendid possessions in prospect, because she could not love the contingent husband as was her duty to him to do.

She did not know as yet that she loved another man.

"And you never came to meet me?" said Mr. Kingston, with tender reproach, as he led her by one reluctant hand to a sofa that was wheeled up comfortably to the fireside. "And I was straining my eyes all across the paddock, to see you on the verandah looking out."

"I was looking out," said Rachel; "I saw the buggy before it reached the woolshed. But – "

"But you thought it would be nicer to have our meeting here, with no one to look on? So it is, darling; you were quite right. I could not have helped kissing you, if all the servants on the place had been standing round; and one doesn't like to make a public exhibition of one's self. Oh, my pet, I *am* so glad to get you again! And how are you? Let me have a good look at you. Oh, if you are going to blush, how am I to tell whether you are looking well or not?"

"I am not going to blush," said Rachel; "and I am quite well. I never was better. The country air is doing me ever so much good."

"I am not so sure of that," rejoined Mr. Kingston, rather gravely, stroking her soft cheek. "You look fagged, as if you had been knocking about too much. I didn't like your going to those rubbishy little races – I told Thornley so. Have you been sitting up late at night?"

"No – I have been doing *nothing*," pleaded Rachel; "I am really as well as possible. How is the house getting on?"

"The house is not doing much at present. They are still pottering at the foundations, which seem to take a frightful lot of doing to. Not that they have had time to make much progress since you were there – it is not much over a fortnight yet, you know. Oh, but it has been a long fortnight! Rachel, now I have got you, I don't mean to lose sight of you again."

"How did you leave Beatrice?" inquired Rachel, hastily.

"Beatrice is quite well – as sprightly as ever. I told her I meant to bring you back to town, by force of arms if necessary, and she said I was quite right. We can't do without you in Melbourne – I can't, anyhow; and what's more, I don't mean to try."

"How is Uncle Hardy?"

"Uncle Hardy? I'm sure I don't know – I was very nearly saying I don't care. Of course he is quite well; he always is, I believe. Is there anybody else you are particularly anxious about, Mademoiselle?"

"Yes," said Rachel, smiling and blushing; "I am anxious about Black Agnes. How is my dear Black Agnes? *Does* William attend to her properly?"

"I don't leave her to William," said Mr. Kingston. "I have taken her away to my own stables. And there she is eating her head off – wanting you, like the rest of us. If you have no more questions to ask, I'll begin; may I? I have some *really* important inquiries to make."

Rachel gasped. But to her immense relief Lucilla was heard approaching, talking at an unnecessarily high pitch of voice to her mother, who responded with equal vigour; and the two ladies entered, followed by Mr. Thornley, all wearing a more or less deprecatory aspect.

The men and the matrons grouped themselves round the fire, and plunged into an animated discussion of the latest Melbourne news. Rachel poured out the tea, and insisted on carrying it round to everybody, regardless of polite protests; which charmed her lover very much.

He was rather cold, and a little stiff and tired after his unwonted exertion; his seat was soft and restful; and he liked to see the slender creature gliding about, with her sweet face and her deft hands, and picture to himself with what meek dutifulness she would serve her lord and master when the time came.

Rachel hoped they were in for a pleasant gossip till dinner time, but she was much mistaken.

"I must go and see after my baby, Mr. Kingston, if you will excuse me," said Lucilla at the end of half-an-hour, setting down her empty but still smoking teacup, and rising with an air that implied a pressing duty postponed to the very last moment. Mr. Kingston expressed an ardent desire to make the baby's acquaintance, which flattered the young mother greatly, but otherwise led to nothing. Lucilla went out, promising to introduce her son under favourable auspices in the morning; and as she disappeared, Mrs. Hardy jumped up and followed her with apparently anxious haste.

"Oh, Lucilla, I *quite* forgot that aconite for Dolly's cold!" she exclaimed; "shall I come and look for it now?"

Mr. Thornley, left behind, stood on the hearthrug, shifting uneasily from one leg to the other. He cleared his throat, remarked that the days were lengthening wonderfully, moved some ornaments on the chimney-piece, and looked at his watch.

"Dear me," he muttered briskly, as if struck with a sudden thought, "a quarter to six, I do declare! Excuse me a few minutes, Kingston."

"Certainly," replied Mr. Kingston. And then *he* went out.

"How stupid they are!" cried poor Rachel to herself, almost stamping her foot with vexation. But there was no help for it. The affianced couple were once more left to themselves – as affianced couples should be, and should like to be – in the pleasant firelight and no less pleasant twilight shadows that were filling the quiet room.

Mr. Kingston rose, took his reluctant sweetheart's hand, and led her back to the sofa by the hearth.

"What time do they have dinner here?" he asked.

"Seven o'clock," said Rachel, with a sinking heart.

"Then we shall have nearly an hour to ourselves, shan't we? Come then, and let us have a good long talk. But first, I've got something for you."

He began to fumble in his pockets, and presently drew forth a little square packet, neatly sealed up in paper, which he laid on Rachel's knee. Wise man! he had not had his long and varied experiences for nothing.

The girl in smiling perplexity turned the mysterious parcel over and over, broke first one seal and then another with much delicate elaboration; cautiously stripped off the paper wrappings, and revealed, as she expected, a morocco jewel-case.

"Oh, how kind!" she murmured, stroking it caressingly with her white fingers.

"Open it before you say that," said he; "you don't know that there is anything in it yet."

"Ah, but I know your ways," she rejoined; "I know it is sure to be something lovely." And then she lifted the lid, and exclaimed "O-o-oh!" with a long breath. There lay, on a bed of blue velvet, a beautiful little watch, thickly set on one side of the case with tiny diamond sparks, which on examination proved to illuminate the flourishes of a big R; and a chain of proportionate value was coiled around it.

Rachel was in ecstasies. She had longed for a watch all her life, and had never yet had one, except an old silver warming-pan of her father's, which would not go into a lady's pocket.

It was only lately that Mr. Kingston had discovered this fact; and he had immediately had one prepared for her, such as he considered would be worthy of her future position in society, and of his own reputation for good taste. He felt himself well repaid for his outlay at this moment. Of her own accord she put up her soft lips and kissed him, pouring out her childish gratitude for his thoughtfulness, and his kindness, and his goodness, in broken exclamations which were charmingly naïve and sweet.

"You are always giving me things," she murmured, shyly stroking his coat sleeve.

"Dear little woman!" he responded, with ardent embraces, from which she did not shrink – at least, not much; "it is my greatest pleasure in life to give you things."

And from this substantial base of operations the astute lover opened the campaign which was to deliver her, a helpless captive, into his hands.

"And now," he said, when the watch having been consigned to its pocket in her pretty homespun gown, and the chain artistically festooned from a button-hole at her waist, a suggestive silence fell upon them – "now I want to know what you mean by saying you won't be married till next year? Naughty child, you made me very miserable with that letter. Though to be sure it was better than the other one, which was so horribly, so really brutally, cold that I had to go to the fire to get warm after reading it. Oh, Rachel, you are not *half* in love yet, I fear!"

"Don't say that," she murmured, with tender compunction.

"And I believe that is why you wish to put off our marriage."

"Oh, don't say that!" she repeated, weakly anxious to re-assure and conciliate him, and to postpone unpleasantness – woman-like, afraid of the very opportunity that she wanted when she saw herself unexpectedly confronted with it. "I don't wish to put it off – only for a little while."

"Do you call till next year a little while? Because I don't."

"Of course it is. Why, here is August!"

"And there are five long months – double the time we have been engaged already. And it wouldn't be comfortable to be travelling in the hot season."

"You said spring would be a nice time," suggested Rachel. She was touching his sleeve with timid, deprecatory caresses, and she was desperately frightened and anxious.

"Yes; *this* spring – not twelve months hence. Oh, my pet, *do* let it be this spring. There are three lovely months before us, and I should like to get that Sydney house. I have the offer of it still for a few days; I got them to keep it open till I could consult you. You *must* remember that I am not as young as you are, Rachel; a year one way or the other may be of no account to you, but it is of very great importance to me."

There was a touch of impatience and irritation in his voice, which helped her to pluck up courage to cling to her resolve.

At the same time she heard the soft ticking of that precious watch at her side; her heart was touched and warmed by what she called his "kindness;" and she was anxious to do anything that she *could* do to please him.

"Won't it do when the house is built?" she asked, in a wheedling, cowardly, coaxing tone, as she laid her cheek for a moment on his shoulder. "I will come back to Melbourne as soon as you like – I can stay with Beatrice, if aunt likes to remain here. We can be together almost as if we were married. We can ride together every day, and watch how the house goes on; and you know aunt doesn't mind *how* much you are with us at Toorak. Only if you would consent to put off the wedding till then –"

"Will you promise to marry me then?" he asked quickly.

"Yes, I will, really," she replied, without any hesitation, thankful for the reprieve, which she had been by no means sure of getting.

"As soon as the house is built?"

"As soon as the house is finished."

"No – not finished; that mayn't be next year, nor the year after. As soon as the roof is on?"

Rachel paused.

"How long does that take?"

"Oh, a long time – ever so long."

She paused again, with a longer pause. And then,

"Very well," she sighed, resignedly.

"It is a bargain? You promise faithfully? On your solemn word of honour?"

"Oh, don't make such a terrible thing of it!" she protested, with a rather hysterical laugh, that showed signs of degenerating into a whimper. "I *can* only say I will."

"And that is enough, my sweet. I won't require you to reduce it to writing. Your word shall be your bond. It is a long while to wait, but I must try to be patient. At any rate, it is a comfort to be done with uncertainty, and to have a fixed time to arrange for. And now, perhaps, we ought to go and dress. Tell me how much it wants to seven, Rachel; you have the correct Melbourne time."

CHAPTER II.

THE BEGINNING OF TROUBLES

IT was in the afternoon that Lucilla again expected her guests, on the day of the ball given at Adelonga in honour of the coming of age of her absent stepson; and the hospitable arrangements characteristic of bush households on such occasions, were made for their reception on the usual Adelonga scale. All the visitors were to be "put up" of course; and from the exhaustless piles of material stowed away in the ample store-rooms, bed-rooms were improvised in every hole and corner, and beds made up wherever beds could decently go – in the store-rooms themselves, in the school-room, in the laundry, in the gardener's cottage, as well as in the numerous guest-chambers with which this, in common with other Australian "country seats," was regularly supplied.

Bright log fires burned on every hearth; bright spring flowers adorned all the ladies' dressing-tables; stupendous viands piled the pantry shelves and filled the spacious kitchens with delectable odours.

Servants bustled about with a festive air.

Mr. Thornley, in shirt sleeves, brought forth treasures from the remote recesses of his cellar that no one but he was competent to meddle with.

Mrs. Thornley moved complacently about her extensive domain, regulating all these exceptional arrangements with that housewifely good sense and judgment which distinguished all Mrs. Hardy's daughters.

Rachel found her sphere of action in the ball-room, where with Miss O'Hara and the children, a young gardener to supply material, the station carpenter to do the rough work, and Mr. Kingston to look on and criticise from an arm-chair by the fire, she worked all day at the decorations, which had been designed in committee and partly prepared the day before. The great Japanese screens had been carried away (to be made very useful in the construction of bed and bath-rooms) and the carpets taken up; and now she feathered the great empty room all about with fern-tree fronds – hanging them from extemporised chandeliers, and from wire netting stretched over the ceiling, and from doorless doorways, rooted in masses of shrubs and blossoms that made a bower of the whole place. It was just such a task as she delighted in, and she was considered to have completed it successfully at four o'clock, when she put her finishing touches to a trophy over the chimney-piece, which, though rather complicated as to symbolism, being arranged on a foundation of breech-loaders and riding-whips, had a bold and pleasing effect.

At four o'clock the guests began to arrive. She was directing her attendants to sweep up the last of her litters from the newly-polished floor, when the Digbys' waggonette drove in at the wide-standing garden gates, and rattled up to the house.

After them came other buggies in quick succession. Grooms and house servants poured out to receive them; doors banged; confused voices and laughter rose and fell in waves of pleasant sound through the maze of passages intersecting the rabbit-warren of a house.

Rachel ran to a window and looked out in time to see Lucifer led off to the stables blowing and panting, and jangling his bridle, but stepping out still with unconquered spirit, as became a brave old horse of noble lineage, whom such a master owned.

Mr. Kingston, the only other person just then in the room, came behind her and laid his hands with the air of a proprietor on her shoulders.

"Whose hack is that?" he inquired, with languid curiosity. "Looks a good sort of breed, something like your mare in colour, only much bigger."

"Mr. Dalrymple's," murmured Rachel.

"Dalrymple? – that brother of Mrs. Digby's you spoke of? I've heard of that fellow. I was curious to know who he was, and I made inquiries at the club. He is a rather considerable scamp, if all tales are true."

"All tales are not true," replied the girl, with majestic calmness.

"And pray how do *you* know?" he retorted quickly, a little amused and a great deal irritated by her highly indiscreet behaviour. "I don't suppose that you have heard all that I have – at any rate, I *hope* not."

"I know enough," she stammered hurriedly; "I know the worst anyone can say against him."

"I hope not," repeated Mr. Kingston, with ominous gravity.

"And I know he has done wrong – done very wrong, indeed; but he has had such terrible provocations – he has been, oh, so dreadfully unfortunate!" she went on, wishing heartily that she had not undertaken her new friend's defence, yet finding it easier to go through with it now than to turn back and desert him. "And, whatever he may have been once, he is doing nothing to harm anybody now; and it is cruel of people to be always raking up the past, when it is done with and repented of, and throwing it in his teeth. Any of us would think it hard and unfair – you would yourself."

"Never mind me, my dear; my past is not being called in question that I am aware of."

Mr. Kingston's not very placid temper was rising.

"He is doing nothing wrong now," she repeated, frightened but reckless; "if he were, Mr. Thornley would not invite him here – he said so himself. And Lucilla, though she does not like him – nobody likes him, indeed – says he would never do a mean action, and that he has perfect manners, and that he is a thorough gentleman every way. I think they all agree about *that*."

"And yet don't like him. That is rather inconsistent. And what about yourself, Rachel? If it is not a rude question – are you an exception in this respect, or not?"

He had taken his hands from her shoulders, and was standing sideways in the embrasure of the window, so that he could see her face; and he was smiling in a most unpleasant manner.

Rachel had never seen him like this before, and the first seed of active dislike was sown where as yet there had been nothing worse than indifference. The familiar colour rose and flooded her white brow and her whiter throat. She clenched her hands to still the flutter of her heart. She shut her teeth and struggled in silence against an ignominious impulse to cry.

But Mr. Kingston continued to watch her with that sardonic curiosity; and presently, like the traditional worm, she turned on him.

"Yes," she said, "I am an exception. I like Mr. Dalrymple very much – what little I know of him. I have seen no reason to do otherwise. I do not pay any attention to vulgar gossip."

A timid woman, trying to be defiant, generally fails by overdoing it; and so did she, poor child. Mr. Kingston heard the emphasis of strong emotion, that she would have given worlds to keep back, vibrating through her tremulous accents, and it drove him beyond those considerations of policy and politeness which he made a boast of as his rule of life and action – especially in his dealings with women. Rachel, however, in the category of women, was exceptionally placed with respect to him; and I suppose one must do him the justice to concede that this was an exceptional emergency.

"I'll tell you what," he said, smiling no longer, and speaking with a rough edge to his voice that betokened the original rude nature, usually so carefully clothed, and that she instinctively resented as an indignity, "Thornley can do as he likes about the people he brings here to associate with his wife, but I won't have you making acquaintance with a vagabond like that."

"I have already made his acquaintance," she said quietly.

"Then I beg you will break it off."

"How can I break it off while he is in the same house with me?"

She was surprised to find how strong she was to withstand this incipient tyranny; and yet her heart contracted with a pain very like despair.

"There will be so many people that one – and he a man – may be easily avoided, if you wish to avoid. And you *will* wish to do what would please me, wouldn't you, dear?" he demanded, perceiving that he was bullying her, and trying to correct himself.

"Yes," she replied; "certainly. But I hope you will not ask me to be rude to one of my cousin's guests. I don't mind what else I do to please you. And when I am married, I will of course know nobody but the people you like."

"You are as good as married to me already," he said, putting his arm round her shoulder as she stood before him, with all sorts of changes and revolutions going on within her. "And of course I don't want you to be rude – I don't want you to be anything. Simply don't take any notice of Dalrymple – he will quite understand it; don't dance with him, or have anything to do with him."

"Not dance with him!" she broke out sharply.

Her evident dismay and disappointment, together with her unconscious efforts to evade his embrace, exasperated his already ruffled temper afresh.

"Certainly not," he said, with angry vehemence. "I shall be exceedingly annoyed and vexed if I see you dancing with that man."

Rachel did not know until now how much she had secretly set her heart upon doing this forbidden thing; as her exigent lover did not know until now that he had it in him to be so horribly jealous.

"He will be sure to come and ask me," she said, with a despairing sigh.

"Very well. If he does, I beg you will refuse him."

"Then I must refuse everybody."

"Not at all. He will quite understand that there are reasons why he should be exceptionally treated."

"And do you think I will make him understand *that*?" she burst out, with pathetic indignation that filled her soft eyes with tears. "Do you think I would be so – so infamously rude and cruel? Oh, Mr. Kingston" – she never called him "Graham" except in her letters, though he tried his best to make her – "you don't want to spoil all my pleasure to-night, which was going to be such a happy night?"

"Your pleasure doesn't depend on dancing with Mr. Dalrymple, I *hope*."

"No – no; but may I not treat him like all the rest, for Lucilla's sake – for common politeness' sake?"

"No, Rachel. I don't want to be unkind, my dear, but you must remember your position, and that now you belong to me. A lady who understands these matters can quite easily manage to get off dancing with a man if she wishes, without being rude. You must learn those little social accomplishments, and this is a very good time to begin. Now let us change the subject. Kiss me, and don't look so miserable, or I shall begin to think – but that it would be insulting you too much – that you have fallen in love with this disreputable ruffian."

Mr. Kingston tried to assume a light and airy manner, but his badinage had a menacing tone that was very chilling.

Rachel, strange to say, did not blush at all; she quietly excused herself on the plea that she must go and arrange her dishevelled costume, and (having no private bedroom to-night) went a long way down the garden to a retired harbour for half an hour's meditation.

CHAPTER III.

"WHERE THERE WAS NEVER NEED OF VOWS."

When Rachel came back to the house it was nearly five o'clock.

There was to be a great high tea at six, for which no dressing was required, in place of the ordinary dinner; and as she did not feel inclined to meet the crowd of company that was assembling in the drawing-room sooner than was necessary – to tell the truth, she had been crying, and her eyes were red – she returned by a back way to the ball-room, which she knew would be to all intents and purposes, empty.

As an excuse for doing so she carried in her arms some long wreaths of spiræa which she had discovered on a bush at the bottom of the garden, with which she intended to relieve the masses of box and laurestinus that made the groundwork of her decorations.

Lightly flitting up a stone-flagged passage at the rear of the house, she suddenly came upon Mr. Dalrymple. He emerged from the door of the laundry, which had been assigned to him for sleeping quarters, just as she was passing it.

"Oh!" she cried sharply, as if he had been a ghost; and then she caught her breath, and dropped her eyes, and blushed her deepest blush, which was by no means the conventional mode of salutation, but more than satisfied the man who did not know until this moment how eagerly he had looked for a welcome from her.

"How do you do?" he said, clothing the common formula with a new significance, and holding her hand in a strong grasp; "I was wondering where you were, and beginning to dread all kinds of disasters. Where are you going? May I carry these for you?"

He saw by this time the traces of her recent tears, and the cheerful cordiality of his greeting subsided to a rather stern but very tender earnestness.

Silently he lifted the white wreaths from her arm, and began to saunter beside her in the direction of the ball-room, much as he had led her away into the conservatory on that memorable night, which was only a week, but seemed a year ago.

All the time she was thinking of Mr. Kingston's prohibition, and dutifully desiring to obey him; but she had no power in her to do more.

They passed through the servants' offices, meeting only Lucilla's maid, who was in a ferment of excitement with so many ladies to attend to, and had not a glance to spare for them; they heard voices and footsteps all around them as they entered the house; but they reached the ball-room unperceived and unmolested, and found themselves alone.

The great room, with its windows draped and garlanded, was dim and silent; the gardener's steps stood in the middle ready for the lighting of the lamps; nothing but this remained to be done, and no one came in to disturb them.

For ten minutes they devoted themselves to business. Mr. Dalrymple mounted the steps, and wove the spiræa into whatever green clusters looked too thin or too dark; he touched up certain devices that seemed to him to lack stability; he straightened some flags that were hanging awry; and Rachel stood below and offered humble suggestions.

When they had done, and had picked up a few fallen leaves and petals, they stood and looked round them to judge of the general effect.

"It is very pretty," said Mr. Dalrymple; "and it makes a capital ball-room. I have not seen a better floor anywhere."

"It was laid down on purpose for dancing," said Rachel, who knew she ought now to be making her appearance elsewhere, yet lingered because he did.

"Are you fond of dancing?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes," she said; "very."

"Will you give me your first waltz to-night?"

He was leaning an elbow on the piano, near which he stood, and looking down on her with that gentle but imperious inquiry in his eyes, which made her feel as if she had taken a solemn affidavit to tell the truth.

"I – I cannot," she stammered, after a pause, during which she wondered distractedly how she could best explain her refusal so as to spare him unnecessary pain; "I am very sorry – I would, with pleasure, if I could."

"Thank you," he said, with a slight, grateful bow. "Well, I could hardly hope for the first, I suppose. But I may have the second? Here are the programmes," he added, fishing into a basketful of them that stood on the piano, and drawing two out; "let me put my name down for the second, and what more you can spare; may I?"

She took the card he gave her, opened it, looked at the little spaces which symbolised so much more than their own blank emptiness, looked up at him, and then – alas! She was a timid, tender, weakly creature when she was hurt, and she had not yet got over the effect of Mr. Kingston's harshness; and she had been crying too recently to be able to withstand the slightest provocation to cry.

She tried to speak, but her lip quivered, and a tear that had been slowly gathering fell with an audible pat upon the piano. He drew the card from her in a moment, and at the same time swept away any veil of decorous reticence that she might have wished to keep about her.

"What is the matter?" he asked, with gentle entreaty, which in him was not inconsistent with a most evident determination to find out. "I am not distressing you, asking you to dance with me, am I?"

"Oh, no – it is nothing! Only please *don't* ask me," she almost sobbed, struggling against the shame that she was bringing on herself, and knowing quite well that she would struggle in vain.

He watched her in silence for half a minute – not as Mr. Kingston had watched her, though with even a fiercer attentiveness, and then he said, very quietly,

"Why?"

But he had already guessed.

"Because – because – I have promised not to."

"You have promised Mr. Kingston?"

Scarlet with pain and mortification, in an agony of embarrassment, she sighed almost inaudibly, "Yes."

"Not to dance with me? or merely not to dance waltzes?"

"Must I tell you?" she pleaded, looking up with appealing wet eyes into his hard and haughty face.

"Not unless you like, Miss Fetherstonhaugh. I think I understand perfectly."

"Oh, Mr. Dalrymple, I want to tell you about it, but I cannot. I am saying things already that I ought not to speak of."

"I don't think so," he replied quickly, suddenly softening until his voice was almost a caress, and set all her sensitive nerves thrilling like an Æolian harp when a strong wind blows over it. "It is in your nature to be honest, and to tell the truth. You are not afraid to tell the truth to me?"

"I would not tell you an untruth," she murmured, looking down; "but the truth – sometimes one must, sometimes one ought – to hide it. And I hoped you would not need to know about this."

"Why, how could I help knowing it? Did you think it likely I might by chance forget you were in the ball-room to-night?"

What she thought clearly "blazed itself in the heart's colours on her simple face." But she did not lift her eyes or speak.

"I am very glad I know," he continued, in a rather stern tone. "If you had done this to me, and never told me why – "

"I should have trusted to you to guess that it was not my fault, and to forgive me for it," the girl interposed, looking up at last with a flash in her soft eyes that, as well as her words, told him a great deal more than she had any idea of.

"It was really so?" he demanded eagerly. "It was not your own desire to disappoint me so terribly?"

"Oh, *no*."

"If you had been left to yourself you would have danced with me?"

"Yes, of course."

"Quite willingly?"

"You *know* I would!"

Mr. Dalrymple drew a long breath. It was rather a critical moment. But he was no boy, at the mercy of the wind and waves of his own emotions, and Rachel's evident weakness of self-control was an appeal to his strength that he was not the man to disregard. Still it was wonderful how actively during these last few minutes he had come to hate Mr. Kingston, whom he had never seen.

"I suppose," he said presently, "I must not ask the reason for this preposterous proceeding?"

"Do not," she pleaded gently. "There is no reason, really. It is but Mr. Kingston's whim."

"And are you determined to sacrifice me to Mr. Kingston's whim?"

She did not speak, and he repeated his query in a more imperious fashion.

"Are you really going to throw me over altogether, Miss Fetherstonhaugh? I only want to know."

She looked up at him piteously, and he softened at once.

"Tell me what I am to do," he said, in a low voice. "*Do* you wish me not to ask you for any dances? It is a horrible thing – it is enough to make me wish I had gone to Queensland on Monday, after all – but I will not bother you. Tell me, am I not to ask you at all?"

"If you please," she whispered with a quick sigh, full of despairing resignation. "I am very sorry, but it is right to do what Mr. Kingston wishes."

"That is not my view in this case. However, it is right for *me* to do what *you* wish. And I will, though it is very hard."

Here Rachel, feeling all her body like one great beating heart, moved away to the door, driven by a stern sense of social duty.

Her companion did not follow her, and she paused on the threshold, turned round, and then suddenly hurried back to him.

"Mr. Dalrymple," she said, putting out her hand with an impulsive gesture, "do not wish you had gone to Queensland instead of coming here to-night. If you do I shall be *miserable*!"

He seized her hand immediately, and stooping his tall head at the same moment, brushed it with his moustache. Then, looking up into her scared face, he said – like a man binding himself by some terrible oath:

"*That* I never will."

Once before in that room they had touched the point where not only mere acquaintance but warmest friendship ends. Then it had been to her a new, incomprehensible experience; now she could not help seeing the reason and the meaning of it, though, perhaps, not so clearly as he.

In a moment she had drawn her hand away, and like a bird frightened from its nest, had vanished out of his sight, leaving him – thoroughly aroused from his normal impassiveness – gazing at the empty doorway behind her.

When they met again, ten minutes afterwards, it was in the drawing-room, which was crowded with people; and through all the crush and noise, she was as acutely conscious of his presence as if he alone had been there.

She moved about with tremulous restlessness and downcast eyes; afraid to look at him – afraid he should look at her; paying her little civilities mechanically, and conducting herself generally, to her aunt's extreme annoyance, more like a bashful schoolgirl and a poor relation than ever.

Mr. Kingston, doing his best to fascinate Miss Hale, who stood beside him, giggling and simpering and twiddling her watch-chain, looked anxiously at his little sweetheart when she entered, thought he saw signs of his own handiwork in her disturbed and downcast face, called her to him, and until the great tea-dinner was over, and they all had to disperse to dress, compassed her with devout attentions, intended to assure her of his royal forgiveness and favour.

But he did not remove the prohibition, which made her more and more resentful as she continued to think about it, and less and less responsive to his ostentatious "kindness;" and he treated Mr. Dalrymple – when he condescended to acknowledge his presence at all – with a supercilious rudeness that Mr. Thornley, in conjugal confidence, declared to be "very bad form," and that prompted the gentle Lucilla to be "nicer" to the younger man than Rachel had ever seen her. He was so open in his hostility that it was generally noticed and talked of (and the cause of it more or less correctly surmised).

The only person who seemed absolutely indifferent to it and to him was Mr. Dalrymple himself; and in his secret heart he was much more glad than angry to have earned such pronounced dislike from such a quarter, though as impatient of what he called "impudence" as anybody.

That Adelonga ball was a memorable event to most of the people that it gathered together – as what ball is not? Mr. Thornley celebrated the coming of age of his son and heir, to begin with. Mrs. Thornley appeared for the first time, "officially," after the birth of her baby, who was the hero of all occasions to *her*, and inaugurated a great "county" reputation as a charming hostess and woman.

Mrs. Hardy got her best point lace irretrievably ruined by catching it on an unprotected corner of the wire-netting upon which Rachel had worked her decorations; and she also saw the lamentable frustration of several wise plans that she had made.

Two young people became engaged; others, male and female, fell in love, or began those pleasant flirtations which led to love eventually.

Miss Hale on the other hand, quarrelled with Mr. Lessel, who took upon himself to object to her extravagant appreciation of Mr. Kingston's rather extravagant attentions; and their engagement was broken off.

Mr. Lessel at the same time captivated the fancy of a charming young lady, only daughter of the Adelonga family doctor, resident in the township close by, who was destined in less than twelve months to be his wife.

Mr. Kingston, surfeited with balls, had a deeper interest in this one than in any of the hundreds that he had attended in the course of a long and gay career.

Never before had he admired a pretty woman with such ferocious sincerity as he admired his little Rachel to-night; never before had he used such rude tactics to make the object of his affections jealous – thereby to subdue rebellion in her; never before had he been so defied and circumvented by a being in female shape as he was to-night by this presumptive little nobody, whom he had singled out for honour, and who was bound to honour him, and his lightest wish.

As for Mr. Dalrymple and Rachel – they must be classed together in this catalogue of special experiences, for they shared theirs between them – the Adelonga ball marked a new and very memorable departure in the history of their lives. For half the evening they danced decorously apart.

Mr. Dalrymple justified Mrs. Thornley's expectations, of course, and distinguished himself above all the dancing men assembled; Rachel, who had had but little teaching, was a dancer by nature and instinct, as light and effortless, as airy and graceful as a bit of wind-blown thistle-down.

She loved it, as she loved all pleasant and poetic things; and though she could not have the partner she wanted, and had to take whom she could get, she felt to-night, and more and more as the evening wore away, that she had never heard and felt, in the strains of mere senseless instruments and in the thrill of responsive pulses, music of mundane waltzes and galops of such inspired and impassioned beauty.

There was a young artist from Melbourne who played lovely airs on a violin to a piano accompaniment, and he seemed literally to play upon her, spiritually sensitive as she was to-night to the lightest touch of that divine afflatus which makes poetry of certain passages in the most prosaic lives.

Now rapturously happy, now tragically miserable, and tremulously fluctuating up and down between these two extremes, she was blown about like a leaf in autumn wind by the subtle harmonies of that magical violin. At least she thought it was the violin. We know better.

At about twelve o'clock she went into the house on an errand for Lucilla, and came back by way of the conservatory, as the first bars of a Strauss waltz were stealing through the fern-roofed alleys, with nameless tender associations in every liquid note.

For a few seconds she paused in the shadowy doorway, a slight, white figure against the dim background, with hair like a golden aureola, and milk-white neck and arms – a gracious vision of youth and beauty as prince could wish to see.

But the Sleeping Princess now was acutely wide awake; the life that ran in her quickened pulses was almost more than she could bear. Her eyes shone restlessly, her breath fluttered in her throat, her heart ached and swelled with some vague, irresistible passion, as the waves of that delicious melody flowed over her, like an enchanter's incantation.

A few paces off, within the ball-room, Mr. Dalrymple stood with his back to the wall watching her; his dark face was lit and transfigured with the same kind of solemn exaltation. She turned her head, and they looked at one another, mutually conscious of the supreme moment that had unawares arrived.

He held out his hand – she almost sprang to meet him; and then, oblivious of betrothals, and promises, and houses, and diamonds, she floated down the long room, under the very noses of her aunt and Mr. Kingston, lying in a reckless ecstasy of contentment in her true love's arms.

CHAPTER IV. AFTER THE BALL

WHATEVER might have been Rachel's confusion of mind as to the nature and consequences of her escapade, Mr. Dalrymple, from the moment that he took her in his arms, understood the situation perfectly. It was sufficiently serious to a man in his position, who, whatever his faults, was the soul of honour; but it was never his way to dally with difficulties, and he left himself in no sort of suspense or uncertainty as to how he would deal with this one.

Whether right or wrong, whether wise or foolish, in any sudden crisis requiring sudden choice of action, he obeyed his natural impulse, subject to his own rough code of duty only, without an instant's hesitation, and followed it up with unswerving determination, totally unembarrassed by any anxiety as to where it might lead or what it might cost him, or as to any ultimate consequences that might ensue.

In nine cases out of ten a man of honour, placed as he was now, would have regretted an unconsidered act of folly, and have cast about for means of extricating himself and the girl who was behaving badly to her affianced husband from the position into which it had led them – even, perhaps, to the extent of using

"Some rough discourtesy
To blunt or break her passion."

But he was the one man in ten who, equally a man of honour, felt himself under no obligation to do anything of the kind. If she loved him – and now he knew she did; if he loved her, or was able to love her – and he allowed himself no doubt upon that point from this moment of her self-revelation, though he had not *meant* to permit anybody (least of all a mere child like this) to supplant the dead woman on whom the passion of his best years had been spent – then the thing was settled. They might waltz together till daylight, and no one would have any right to interfere.

The social complications that surrounded them, and which a conventional gentleman would have considered of the last importance, were to him mere matters of detail. They must manage to get out of them as best they could.

So he carried her round and round the room, the most perfect partner he had ever danced with, who moved so sympathetically with all his movements that she might have been his shadow – but for the electric current of strong life that her hand in his, and her light weight on his shoulder, and the subtle sense of her emotion, sent thrilling through his veins; and in the teeming silence his brain was busy making rapid plans and calculations for effectively dealing with the many difficulties that would come crowding upon both of them as soon as this waltz was over.

Clearly, the first thing to do was to dispose of ambiguities between themselves.

"Come into the conservatory," he said, in a quick under tone, when five silent, delicious minutes had passed; "I want to say something to you before these people begin to spread all over the place again."

But even as he spoke, as if a spell had been broken, the light and rapture died suddenly out of her face, her limbs relaxed, her airy footsteps faltered, she seemed to melt away in his arms.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.