

Meade L. T.

The Time of Roses



L. Meade

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CHAPTER I. HOME AT LAST

It was on a summer's evening early in the month of August that the little Mummy was once again seen on the platform at Dawlish.

She looked now very much like she did when we saw her of yore – slightly broadened, it is true, by the added years, but she still wore somewhat rusty widow's black, and her face still had that half-anxious, half-comical expression, which made people turn to look at her with something between a smile and a sigh. She was commonplace and plain, and yet in one sense she was neither commonplace nor plain. She had a character, and that character had developed during the last few years, and rather for the better.

There were very few passengers on the platform, and the little woman paced up and down, thinking to herself.

"She is coming home at last. I don't know whether I am glad or sorry. I wonder what sort of girl Miss Sharston is. She has been very kind to Florence; but it was rash of Florence to invite her. Still, I suppose we shall be able to manage all right."

Just then the signal announcing the approaching train was lowered, and a moment or two later the said train drew up at the platform and one or two passengers alighted. Amongst these was a tall, well-set-up, dark-eyed girl, and accompanying her was another girl, who was not so tall and was very slender, with an ethereal sort of face, and large, speaking grey eyes.

The tall girl rushed up to where the little Mummy was standing.

"Here I am, Mummy," she said, "and this is Kitty, and we are both tired and hungry, and glad to see you again. Is there any sort of trap for our luggage, or can the porter take it and shall we walk to the cottage?"

"The cottage is just as small as ever it was, Florence," replied the little Mummy. "Oh, I am so glad to see you, Miss Sharston." Here she shook hands with Kitty Sharston.

"We like things small," said Kitty; "we want to have a real charming time in the country. It is very good of you to consent to take me in, Mrs. Aylmer."

A porter now appeared. Florence bustled off to see to the luggage, and Mrs. Aylmer and Kitty slowly left the station. Florence ran after them in a moment or two.

"Well," she said, "here we are! Both of us have done with school for ever and a day. We are grown-up girls ready to take our place in the world, and to give you a right good time, Mummy; isn't that so, Kitty?"

"Yes," said Kitty, in that gentle voice which always had a pathetic ring in it. Then she added after a moment's pause: "But I don't know that I am glad to have left school; I must confess that I enjoyed the last few years at Cherry Court School immensely."

"Don't talk to me of Cherry Court School," said the widow, with a little shudder.

She glanced round in an inquiring way at Florence, who coloured faintly and then said, in a stout voice: "I have repented of that old sin long ago, and I do not in the least mind having Cherry Court School alluded to. I have had a right good time, and it was a very lucky thing for me I did not win that Scholarship, for if I had I should have been eating the bread of dependence now, whereas –" Here she drew herself up, uttered a quick sigh, and looked ahead of her.

Her face was not handsome, but it was bright and taking. She was a head and shoulders taller than the little Mummy, who gazed at her with something of her old expression of mingled affection and fear. Florence had quite double the strength of the little Mummy, and this astute personage was aware of the fact.

They reached the tiny house, where Sukey was standing on the steps, looking not a day older than she had done six years ago. She dropped a curtsy when she saw Florence, but Florence ran up and wrung her hand.

"How do you do, Sukey?" she said. "I am very glad to come home, and this is my great friend Miss Sharston."

Sukey stared up at Kitty; then she glanced at Mrs. Aylmer and slowly shook her head.

"It's a very, *very* small house," she said, "and how we are to fit you two young ladies in is more than I can tell."

"Never mind, Sukey," said Mrs. Aylmer; "I have it all arranged; don't you go and put your finger into the pie and spoil things, you silly, stupid old thing."

Here Mrs. Aylmer shook her hand with a playful gesture at Sukey, and then the entire party found themselves in the house. Florence had not been home for two or three years. Kitty had never seen the cottage at Dawlish before. Certainly the one sitting-room was very tiny.

"How it has dwindled!" said Florence, looking round her. "Good gracious! Why, the ceiling nearly reaches my head, and as for the walls" – she stretched out her long arms playfully – "I can almost touch from wall to wall; but never mind, it's home; it's your house, Mummy, and you are good to take us girls in and look after us for a whole delightful fortnight."

"There is a very nice supper waiting for you," said Mrs. Aylmer, "and quite in the old style – crabs and a water-cress salad. I thought you would appreciate that; we so often had crabs for supper when – when you were here last, Flo. You remember them, don't you?"

"Nothing could be more appetising," replied Florence. "Would you like to come upstairs now, Kitty?"

Mrs. Aylmer had given up her wee bed-room to the two girls. Where she was to sleep was a mystery known only to herself; but, as she seemed quite cheerful and happy over it, Florence advised Kitty not to investigate matters too closely.

"It's the Mummy's way," she said; "she likes managing; she quite adores the thought of having us both with her in this little dull house. Can you put up with it, Kitty?"

"The place is quite lovely," replied Kitty, "and I would put up with anything after the news I told you this morning."

"Oh, that your father is really coming back: that you have not to go to India after all: that you are going to live here and take a beautiful house and be real mistress of a home," said Florence.

"I don't know anything about the beautiful house, nor being mistress of a home," replied Kitty; "but I am going to be with father wherever he is, and that," she added, "will be home to me."

"Of course," answered Florence, in a somewhat wistful tone.

"But what are you going to do, Flo?"

"I am going to earn my living," replied Florence stoutly.

"Of course; but how?"

"I shall talk things over with you and the Mummy. I have left school at last for good. What a blessing it is that I shall not have anything to do with Aunt Susan! I feel so jolly independent; but I should like to meet her and –"

"Girls, supper is ready," called out Mrs. Aylmer's voice from below, and the two ran downstairs.

The meal was very merry; the old schoolfellows were glad to be together. Mrs. Aylmer chatted in very much the way she had chatted six years ago. She could not help constantly alluding to Mrs. Aylmer the great.

"I have not seen her," she said; "but she sends me my money regularly once a quarter – twelve pounds ten shillings. She never misses a day, I will say that for her, and I think I am a very good manager not to be one farthing in debt."

"You are perfectly splendid, mother," replied Florence.

"She has never once asked for you; she said she would not, and she has kept her word," continued Mrs. Aylmer.

"Well, mother, does it matter?" replied the daughter.

"They say, too," continued the little Mummy – and here she heaved a heavy sigh – "that she has adopted a young man as her heir. I have never seen him, but his name is Maurice Trevor. He is no relation of any sort, and goodness knows why she has adopted him. They say he is a very pushing and a very designing young man, and that he twists poor Susan round his little finger. I know she sent him to Cambridge and spent an enormous sum on him there – two or three hundred a year at the very least – and now he has returned and lives with her, and is to take the management of her estates. She has been buying a lot of fresh property; but there – I am sick of the subject. You didn't play your cards well, Florence; you ought to have been in the position which young Mr. Trevor occupies."

"I am glad I am not," replied Florence; "I'm twice the girl for being independent. Mother, Kitty and I want to go out and have a walk by the seashore."

"Do, my dear, do; I have a great deal to contrive and manage, and Susan's temper is not what it was. Oh, don't breathe it too loud. I wouldn't part with her for the world; but really she does rule me. She'll be as cross as two sticks because we sat so long over supper. Do go; it is a lovely evening."

So the two girls put on their hats and went out. There was a silver moon shining to-night on a silver sea, and the place looked calm and peaceful, as if no storms had ever ruffled those waters: as if no trouble had ever visited those shores.

Kitty, whose heart was full of song and her face of delight, almost danced as she walked. Florence's steps were also full of spring, but they were a little slower than her companion's.

"What are you thinking of, Flo?" said the younger girl.

"All sorts of things," replied Florence; "about that man, Maurice Trevor, for instance. I don't envy him."

"Nor do I. I wonder he submits to it," said Kitty. "But don't let us think of him. He has nothing whatever to do with us."

"No more he has," answered Florence; "but to eat the bread of dependence: to eat *her* bread! Oh, he must be a horror! I only trust I shall never meet him."

Kitty now linked her arm inside her companion's.

"You must often come and stay with me," she said: "it would be delightful. I will coax and beg of father to have a house where you can come; then you will have two homes, you know, Florry: the little Mummy's home, as you always call your mother, and my home. You will be equally welcome at both. Oh, dear, you are quite my very greatest friend – the greatest friend I have in all the world."

"You are wonderfully good to put up with me," said Florence; "but there, I have repented of that old sin, and it is not going to darken my life."

"There is only one thing I dislike about you, Florence," said Kitty. She frowned slightly as she spoke.

"What is that?"

"You always will revert to the old times. Just do promise me that you won't speak of them again, at least to me."

"I will try not, darling; but you are good to forget."

CHAPTER II.

THE LITTLE MUMMY'S ARRANGEMENTS

Those who remember "A Bunch of Cherries" will recall the fact that Florence Aylmer left Cherry Court School under a cloud: that Kitty Sharston won the prize offered by Sir John Wallis, and of course stayed on at the school; and that Bertha Keys, finding her game was up and her wickedness discovered, disappeared – it was hoped by the unhappy girl whom she had injured never to show her face again.

In this old world of ours, however, bad people do not always receive their punishment, and it came to pass that Bertha Keys, although she had failed in the case of Cherry Court School, did manage to feather her nest and to secure a very comfortable post for herself.

So daring an adventuress was this young woman that she absolutely made up her mind to lay siege to no less a person than Mrs. Aylmer the great.

It was easy for her to do this. Mrs. Aylmer had not noticed her on that auspicious occasion when all the girls of the school were collected in Sir John Wallis's fine old house. The part that Bertha had played in the affair, which had lowered her niece in her eyes for ever, was very slightly impressed on her memory. There was a pupil teacher who had not behaved right, but what the name of that pupil teacher was had never sunk into the good lady's memory.

She was terribly disappointed about her niece Florence, although she pretended not to care, and a month or two afterwards she advertised in a local paper for a companion.

The person who answered this advertisement was Bertha Keys. She managed to satisfy the good lady with regard to testimonials, taking care never to breathe the name of Cherry Court School. She secured the post, and from that moment ruled Mrs. Aylmer, although Mrs. Aylmer supposed that she ruled her.

Florence found a friend in Sir John Wallis, who put her on the foundation of an excellent school which he knew of. She was well educated, and now at the age of twenty was prepared to fight the battle of life.

Florence had received a present of twenty pounds from Sir John Wallis on leaving school, and with this slender provision she meant to fight the world and find her own niche.

Kitty Sharston had fulfilled all her early promise of beauty and grace. Her father was now returning to England, and she was to go and live with him.

Mrs. Aylmer the less was just as determined and just as peculiar as in the days of old. She always spoke out what she thought, and the next morning at breakfast, as the two girls with rosy faces and bright eyes sat round the very tiny board, she expounded her views.

"Florence," she said, "I am nothing if I am not frank."

"We know that, Mummy," replied her daughter, with a twinkle in her bright dark eyes; "what is up now?"

"Only this: I have been thinking things in the night."

"Oh, do satisfy my curiosity, Mrs. Aylmer," exclaimed Kitty; "where did you sleep last night? You don't know how uncomfortable Florry and I were, fearing we had taken your bed."

"Which you did, my dear. If it was a subject of fear, your fears were realised," responded the little widow.

"Oh, but this is quite dreadful: ought we to stay on here, Florry, or, at least, ought I to stay on?"

"How much, Florry, are you going to pay me per week?" now exclaimed Mrs. Aylmer. "I wish I could take you, my dear, darling child, for nothing; but the fact is, I cannot, and if I could Sukey would not allow it. Sukey says that a greater stint she will not bear, and twelve pounds ten a quarter

cannot be made to go farther than we two poor women make it go, Florence. Do you think you could rise to the sum of fifteen shillings a week if I give you meat every day?"

"Of course, Mummy, of course."

"And I must and will pay a pound a week," said Kitty; "why, it is cheap – so cheap that father will be more than astonished, and the place is so lovely, and I am enjoying it greatly. Can you put me up and give me what food I require for a pound a week, Mrs. Aylmer?"

"It will be riches," said Mrs. Aylmer, with tears in her eyes. "The fact is, I can feed you both comfortably for ten shillings a piece, and the rest will be clear profit: fifteen shillings over for clear profit. Why, I won't know myself. I might be able to buy some new clothes; for I declare, my dears, I am shabby, having turned and turned and contrived and contrived until my clothes are past wearing. Your aunt has not sent me a box of her cast-offs for over a year, and I think it is extremely unkind of her."

"But you have not told me yet where you slept last night, dear Mrs. Aylmer," said Kitty.

"Well, dear, if you must know, I slept here in this room. I slept on the dining-table. I borrowed some extra pillows from a neighbour, or, rather, Sukey borrowed them for me, for it would never do for my friends to suppose that I have not got abundance of pillows in my own house. I have had quite a luxurious night, my dear girls; so pray don't trouble about me."

Kitty looked somewhat inclined to cry, but Florence burst out laughing. She jumped up, went to her mother, and put her arms round her neck.

"You dear little Mummy," she said; "you are too comical for anything."

"There is no doubt whatever," replied Mrs. Aylmer, in answer to this caress, "that God Almighty makes us each in the most useful shape and form. Now, you are big, Florence, and could never manage on a table, but a little woman like me – why, it comes in most handy. Everything is arranged for the best, and so I always say." Here she glanced around her with her black eyes full of merriment, and certainly she looked as happy, notwithstanding her uncomfortable bed, as woman could look.

"I thought of sharing the kitchen with Sukey," she said; "but she won't stand any disarrangement of her habits, so there was nothing but the table, and if you think that it isn't worth that small discomfort for the sake of having you two bright young things about the house, and the neighbours remarking on you and wondering how I am managing, and I with fifteen shillings a week to the good in my pocket, why, you don't know your mother, Florence Aylmer."

"Well, Mummy, and what was that thought you said you had in the back of your head?" continued Florence.

"Oh, that," said Mrs. Aylmer – here she looked at both girls. "I wonder, Kitty Sharston," she said, "if you can keep a secret?"

"Try me, Mrs. Aylmer," replied Kitty.

"Well, I was thinking things over in the night, and it struck me that the very best possible way to punish my sister-in-law, Susan Aylmer, and have everything that was wrong put right, is for you, Florence, to secure the young man, Maurice Trevor, as your husband."

"Oh, mother, how can you talk such nonsense?" said Florence. "As if I would," she added, jumping to her feet and shaking the crumbs from her dress.

"There," said Mrs. Aylmer, "that's just like you. I have been planning it all. You have but to show the fascinations which all women ought to possess, and you will soon twist him round your little finger."

"I could never, never think of it, mother; and I am distressed that you should say it, and more particularly before Kitty," was Florence's answer.

Mrs. Aylmer laughed.

"Girls always say that," she remarked, "but in the end they yield to the inevitable. It would be a splendid *coup*; it would serve her right. She would be forced to have you living with her after all. I am told she has made the young man the heir of all she possesses, and – but what is the matter, my dear?"

"I really won't listen to another word," cried Florence, and she jumped up and ran out of the room.

Mrs. Aylmer's eyes now filled with tears. She looked full at Kitty.

"I don't know what is the matter with Florence," she said. "I had hoped that that dreadful thing which happened years ago had subdued her spirit and tamed her a trifle, but she seems just as obdurate as ever. It was such a beautiful idea, and it came over me in the night, and I thought I would tell Florence at once, and we might put our heads together and contrive a means by which the young folks could meet; but if she takes it up in that dreadful spirit, what is to be done?"

"But, of course, Mrs. Aylmer, it would never do," said Kitty. "How can you think of such a thing for a single moment?"

CHAPTER III.

A STARTLING MEETING

Kitty went out soon afterwards and joined Florence on the beach. They walked up and down, chatting eagerly. For a time nothing whatever was said about Mrs. Aylmer's queer suggestion; then suddenly Florence spoke of it.

"There is one thing I ought to say, Kitty."

"What is that?" asked Kitty.

"You must never mind the little Mummy's oddities. She has lived alone on extremely circumscribed means for many years, and when she gets an idea into her head she broods on it."

"You mean, of course, what she said with regard to Mr. – Mr. Trevor," said Kitty, flushing as she spoke.

"Yes, it wasn't nice of her," said Florence, with a sigh; "and we won't either of us think of it again. Kitty, I have made up my mind not to marry."

"Why so?"

"For a great many reasons. One of them is that I vastly prefer my independence. Another is that I do not think a rich nice man is likely to come in my way, and I do not want to have anything to do with a poor man, whether he is nice or nasty. I have seen too much of poverty. I have had it close to me all my days. I mean to do well in the world: to be beholden to no one. In a fortnight's time I am going to London. I am just taking this one fortnight of rest and refreshment: then I go to London. I have in my trunk half a dozen introductions to different people. I mean to use them; I mean to get something to do; I mean to step from the lowest rung of the ladder up to the highest. I mean to be a success: to prove to the world that a girl can fight her own battles, live her own life, secure her reward – be, in short, a success."

"Why, Florence," said her companion, "how well you speak; how excited you look!"

"I have not gone through all I have gone through in my life for nothing," was Florence's reply. "I will never scheme again, I will never again do anything underhand, and I will not marry the man my mother has singled out for me."

She had scarcely said the words before the attention of both girls was arrested by the sound of a merry laugh not ten yards away. They both looked round, and Florence's cheeks first of all grew vivid and then turned white. A gracefully-dressed woman, or rather girl, was crossing the sands, accompanied by a young man in a grey suit. The man had broad shoulders, closely-cropped, rather fair hair, a sweeping moustache, and eyes as blue as the sky. He had a nice, open sort of face. He was tall, nearly six feet in height, and held himself as erect as a grenadier. He was bending towards the girl and talking to her, and the girl continued to laugh, and once she glanced with a quick, darting movement in the direction where Kitty and Florence were sitting. Then, touching her companion on the arm, she said: "I am tired; will you take me back to the hotel?"

Neither Kitty nor Florence said a word until the pair – the good-looking, well-set-up young man and the girl in her pretty summer dress – disappeared from view. Then Florence turned to Kitty.

"It is?" said Florence.

Kitty nodded.

"Who would have believed it?" continued Florence. She started up in her excitement.

"I do not think I can quite stand this," she said.

"But where has she come from?" said Kitty again.

"How can I tell? I never want to see her wicked face again."

"She looks just as young as she did six years ago," said Kitty. Then she added impulsively: "I am sorry I have seen her again; I never could bear her face. Do you think her eyes were set quite straight in her head, Florence?"

"I don't know anything about that," answered Florence recklessly. "Long ago she did me a great deal of harm. There came a time when I almost hated her. Whether her eyes are straight or not, her mind at least is crooked. Who is that man she is with?"

"He is good-looking and looks nice also," said Kitty.

Florence made no reply. The girls paced up and down together; but somehow the edge of the day's enjoyment seemed gone. They went in to their midday meal between twelve and one, and afterwards Kitty, who said she felt a little tired, went to lie down. Florence, however, was still restless and perturbed; she hated the thought of the vicinity of Bertha Keys, and yet she had a curious longing to know something about her.

"I am not going to fight shy of her or to show her that I am in the least afraid of her," thought Florence; "I can make myself much more disagreeable to her and much more dangerous than she can ever make herself to me. I wonder where she is staying?"

Mrs. Aylmer proposed that she and her daughter should spend the afternoon on the sands.

"Let us visit the shrimp-woman and get some fresh shrimps and perhaps a crab or a lobster for supper," said the little Mummy, holding out a bait which would have quite won the day in the old times. But Florence had outgrown her taste for these special dainties.

"I want to go out alone, Mummy," she said; "you and I and Kitty can have a walk after tea, but just for the present I must be alone." She pinned on her hat, put on her gloves, and left the cottage.

Mrs. Aylmer stood in the porch and watched her.

"A good girl, a fairly good-looking girl too," she said to herself, "but obstinate, obstinate as a mule. Even that trouble of long ago has not tamed her. She is the image of her poor dear father; he always was a man with a desperate will of his own."

Miss Aylmer watched Florence until she disappeared in the direction of the pier. There was a bench there, and a girl was seated on it. She wore a pink dress of some washing material and a large black shady hat. Florence came nearer and nearer. The girl, who was reading a book, dropped it and gazed in her direction. Presently Florence found herself within less than two hundred yards from the place where the other girl was seated. At this moment the girl flung down her book, uttered a hasty exclamation, and came forward.

"Is it or is it not Florence Aylmer?" she said. She held out both her hands, uttering a little cry of apparent pleasure.

Florence did not notice the outstretched hands. She came up to her.

"I have come on purpose," she said; "I knew you were here. What are you doing here?"

"Why should I tell you what I am doing?" replied Bertha. Her eyes slightly contracted, she pushed her hair away from her forehead, then she looked full at Florence and uttered a laugh. "What is the good of quarrelling?" she said. "We have met. I am in the running; you are out of it. I am up and you are down. My prospects are first-rate, yours –"

"What do you mean? How can you tell anything about my prospects? Why do you trouble me? Why did you come to meet me just now?"

"Speak the truth," said Miss Keys; "were you not coming on purpose to see me?"

Florence was silent for a moment.

"I recognised you this morning," she said, "and I was restless to know why you were here."

"Ah, curiosity, you are Eve's own daughter," said Bertha Keys, with a laugh. "Well, now that we have met, we may as well talk the thing out. Can you deny that you are down and I am up?"

"I neither deny nor affirm your statement," replied Florence. "I have never heard of you – I have never mentioned your name since that dreadful day at Cherry Court six years ago."

"Six years this autumn – not quite six years yet," replied Bertha, correcting her. "Yes, I too remember the day," she said thoughtfully. "It seemed a bad day for me, and yet it was a good one. I have feathered my nest. You stepped out of it and I stepped in. Do you understand?"

"I don't."

"You have grown a good deal, Florence Aylmer," said Bertha, looking her all over. "You are what would be called a fine young woman. If you had had the advantages of a refined life, of very good dress, you might, now that you are grown up, command almost any future. As it is" – she shrugged her shoulders.

"What is the matter with my dress?" said Florence; "you always were queer and rude, Bertha, and time has not improved you."

"You cannot say that I am badly dressed," said Bertha Keys, and she glanced at her exquisitely-cut pink zephyr skirt, her pretty blouse, and her neat shoes.

Florence also eyed her all over.

"You are well got up," she said; "but what of that? Your face never changes."

"Thank you for the compliment," replied Bertha; "I cannot say that you are well got up, and your face, if it has changed, is not more beautiful than it promised to be."

"Pray leave my face alone; it belongs to me, not to you," retorted Florence, with some spirit.

"Do you want to know what I am doing now: how I am managing to live?" said Bertha.

"You can tell me if you please; if you prefer not to say anything, it does not matter in the least."

"But it does matter; it matters a good deal," replied Bertha. "You did something very silly long ago. You thought to succeed, but you failed. It was not my fault. I did what I could for you. If I was clever then, I am still more clever now. I have a gift of writing, but I need not wear my brain out thinking of curious essays and well-devised stories and clever plots. I am working at my own story, and I think it will come off well."

"But what do you mean? Where are you?"

"We are staying at the 'Crown and Garter' for the present."

"We?" said Florence, in a questioning tone.

"Yes; how stupid you are! Have not you guessed! Mrs. Aylmer, Mr. Trevor, and I."

"You don't mean it?" said Florence, springing to her feet. "Aunt Susan! Are you staying with her?"

"Yes, and I fancy I am indispensable to her. I have lived with her for nearly six years. I manage her affairs; I write her letters; I attend to her business; she consults me about everything. She goes where I like; she does what I want. The nest is comfortable. It was meant for you, but it fits me. Now perhaps you know."

"And Mr. – Mr. Trevor?" said Florence, in a trembling voice.

"Oh, he fits me too. He is a very good fellow, very nice indeed. He thinks I am quite an angel; he admires my talent, as he calls it. I believe he would be very sad if I were not there; he is much more likely to go than I am. Yes, Florence, you did well for me when you lost that Scholarship. I thought I would tell you."

"Oh! oh!" said Florence, trembling and turning pale; "but if Aunt Susan knew! If she knew!"

"Yes, if she knew," said Bertha, "but she does not know, and of course you won't tell her."

"You think I won't; but – but Mummy will."

"I don't think so. It would be much worse for yourselves if you did. I can hoodwink her; I can turn her against your mother; I can make her more bitterly opposed to you. Now you have to understand. I have long felt that I must come to an understanding with you. You must keep silence. If you speak you will do very little good, but it is possible you may give me an uncomfortable half-hour. Now, I don't care to have an uncomfortable half-hour, and, above all things, I don't want Mr. Trevor set against me."

"Do you – do you mean to marry him?" said Florence abruptly.

Bertha Keys coloured very faintly.

"You are impertinent," she said; "I refuse to answer. I am comfortable where I am, and I mean to stay there. If you put Mr. Trevor against me, if you put Mrs. Aylmer against me, it will be all the worse for yourself; but if, on the other hand, you respect my secret, I can make things perhaps a shade more comfortable for you."

"Oh, oh, Bertha, no," said poor Florence. She covered her face – her cheeks were crimson. "I hate you! I can never be your friend. Why did you come here?"

"I came on purpose. I have not lost sight of you. You know something about me which I do not want the world to know. You could make things uncomfortable for me. I guessed that you would be coming here about now, and Mrs. Aylmer, Mr. Trevor, and I came to the 'Crown and Garter' at my suggestion. We will leave again the day after to-morrow; but not – not until you have made me a promise."

CHAPTER IV. AN EVIL GENIUS

After Bertha said the last words, Florence was quite silent. Bertha turned and looked at her; then, satisfied with what she saw or fancied she saw in her face, she turned aside again, giving a faint sigh as she did so.

"It was a narrow shave," she said to herself; "this had to be. If she took it in one way all was lost; but she won't take it in that dreadful way: she will protect me for her own sake. The girl who could stoop to deceit, who could use my assistance to gain her own ends six years ago, is not immaculate now. I can use her in the future; she will be extremely useful in many ways, and my secret is absolutely safe."

So Bertha leant back against the bench, crossed one prettily-shod foot over the other, and looked out across the summer sea. Presently Florence spoke in a low tone.

"Good-bye," she said. She rose as she uttered the words.

"Why do you say that? Sit down again. We have come to no terms."

"We cannot come to any," answered Florence, in still that low, almost heart-broken voice. Then, all of a sudden, without the least warning, she burst into tears.

"You bring the past back to me, Bertha," she said: "the hateful past."

"It is very silly of you indeed to cry," said Bertha; "and as to the past, goodness knows it is dead and buried deep enough unless you choose to dig it out of its grave. Leave it alone, Florence, and come to terms with me. Now, for goodness' sake stop crying!"

"I won't tell of you just at present," said Florence; "that is the only thing I can say now." Once more she rose.

"You had Kitty Sharston with you this morning," continued Bertha. "She recognised me too, did she not?"

"Yes, we both recognised you."

"I never did anything particular to injure her; I mean, everything came right for her," continued Bertha; "she could scarcely interfere. It is you whom I dread. You and your mother between you can do me harm; but, after all, even at your very worst I may not be deprived of my present comfortable home and my delightful future. But I do not choose to run the risk, so you must promise that you won't betray me."

"Does mother know that Mrs. Aylmer – that Aunt Susan is staying at Dawlish?" continued Florence.

"She probably knows it by this time. Mrs. Aylmer has written her a note asking her to call to see her. She won't see you, so don't imagine it."

"I don't want to see her."

"Before your mother accepts that invitation, I want you to secure her silence; or, stay," continued Bertha briskly, "I will see her myself." She thought for a moment over a new idea which had come to her. Her lips then broke into smiles.

"How stupid of me!" she said. "I never thought of your mother before; she is the very person. I will meet you to-morrow morning here, Florence, and then you can tell me what you decide. It will be all the better for you if you are wise: all the worse for you if you are silly. Now go home, as I see you are dying to do so."

Florence turned away from her companion without even bidding her good-bye: her heart was in a tumult. She scarcely knew what to say or what to do.

She did not want to injure Bertha, and yet she hated to feel that she was in her present position. She disliked her as much as it was possible for her to dislike anyone.

"She makes me feel bad," thought the girl; "she brings back the dreadful past. Oh, I was a wicked girl; but she helped to make me so. She brings back the dreadful, dreadful past."

By the time she had reached her mother's cottage she resolved to tell her exactly what had transpired and to ask her advice.

"For the little Mummy must also have learned her lesson: the little Mummy will tell me what is right to do," thought the girl.

But when she entered the house Mrs. Aylmer was nowhere to be seen.

Sukey, on the contrary, came forward with an important manner.

"Well, Miss Flo," she said, "when you come to the place, that aunt of yours seems also to put in an appearance. Your mother has had a note from her. She is staying at the 'Crown and Garter,' and Mrs. Aylmer has gone up there to tea. No, you are not invited, Miss Flo, and sorry I am that you are not."

"It doesn't matter, Sukey," replied Florence. She sighed as she spoke.

"Have you a bit of a headache, my dear?" asked the old servant.

"Yes, I think I have," answered the girl.

"I'll get you your tea, and the tea for the other pretty young lady too. You can have it in the porch. It's a lovely evening. It don't do for girls to have headaches; but there's nothing to set you right like a cup of tea."

Sukey bustled off to prepare the simple meal, and presently Kitty came downstairs. She was refreshed by her sleep and inclined to be merry with Florence. Florence, however, felt too anxious to talk much.

"What is the matter with you, Florry? Are you worried about anything?" asked the companion.

"Oh, I suppose it is about that wretched Bertha Keys. What can she be doing here?"

"You'll be amazed when I tell you that I saw Bertha this afternoon," continued Florence. "Where do you think she is staying? What post do you think she has secured?"

"How can I tell?" answered Kitty, raising her brows almost with impatience; then she added, before Florence could utter a word: "I am afraid I don't greatly care. All you and I want is that she should not come into our lives."

"But she has come into my life once more," said poor Florence, clasping and unclasping her strong white hands as she spoke. "I believe she is my evil genius. I quite dread her, and she has a power over me, and it has not lessened, although I have not seen her for six years. Do you know where she is staying?"

"No."

"She is living with Aunt Susan Aylmer as her companion."

Kitty was so much startled by the news that she sprang to her feet.

"Never!" she cried.

"It is the case; she has been with Aunt Susan for years."

"But how did she get the post? From the little I have seen of your aunt, she is one of the most particular, fastidious women in the world."

"Trust Bertha to manage that," replied Florence, in a bitter tone; "but anyhow, she is very much afraid of me: she does not want me to see Aunt Susan, nor tell her what I know."

"And what will you do, Flo?"

"I am undecided at the present moment."

"I think you ought to tell her," said Kitty gravely.

"She won't see me, and I do dread making Bertha a greater enemy than she is at present."

"All the same, I think you ought to tell her," replied Kitty. She looked grave and earnest as she spoke.

"If I were you I would," replied Florence, with some bitterness; "if I were you I would never do a crooked thing, or think a crooked thought; but I am not made that way. I am different, quite different. She frightens me."

"Well, don't think any more of her just now. Take your tea and let us go out for a walk."

CHAPTER V. MAURICE TREVOR

Florence's head ached sufficiently badly to make her inclined to follow Kitty's advice. The girls had just finished their tea when Mrs. Aylmer, with flushed cheeks, and wearing her very best turned-for-the-twentieth-time dress, entered the little room where they were seated.

"Well, well, girls," she said: "well, well, where do you think I have been?"

"I know, Mummy," said Florence.

"You know!" replied Mrs. Aylmer. "Who told you?"

"Sukey."

"I begged of her not; but really that woman can keep nothing to herself, and she is always agog to be first in the field. Your aunt is going to send me a trunk full of old clothes. I dare say some of them may be made to fit you, Flo."

"I do not think so, mother," answered Florence.

"Where is the use of being proud? She's a very fine figure of a woman still. She wears wonderfully, and she has a most charming secretary: a sort of companion, a delightful girl. She and I walked down together almost to this door. She is in your shoes, my poor Florence; but she is really a *very* nice girl."

"I have seen her to-day, mother; I know who she is," said Florence gravely; "her name is Bertha Keys."

"Bertha Keys," replied Mrs. Aylmer; "Bertha Keys?"

"You know who Bertha Keys is, mother. She is the girl, the pupil teacher, who behaved so badly at Cherry Court School six years ago."

"Oh, we won't mention that affair; it is dead and buried; we are not going to dig it out of its grave," replied Mrs. Aylmer.

Florence did not reply. She looked full at her mother.

"Bertha has been saying something to her," she thought; "she has been trying to influence her. Those were almost Bertha's own words." She got up hastily.

"The fact is, mother, I do not care to talk of it," she said; "the whole thing has upset me very much."

"Well, darling, I cannot think that it is your affair. It is bitterly disappointing that you should have lost your Aunt Susan's patronage. How proud I should be of you now if you were really her adopted daughter."

"Why, no, mother, you would not see me; you forget that part."

"To be sure, how stupid I am!" said Mrs. Aylmer. "Well, your aunt was most agreeable to-day: not so stingy either. We had quite a nice little tea; and that young man I told you of, Mr. Trevor, he came in. He is a charming person, my dear; quite fascinating. I was much taken with him. I longed to ask him to call, but I saw that Susan would allow no liberties. He chatted to me all the time, and was so agreeable. I am quite delighted with him."

"We are going for a walk now, mother," said Florence.

"Well, dear, do; you both look pale. I want you to get nice and sunburnt, and to have a right good time. Yes, I am quite pleased with my visit. There is no use in quarrelling with your relations, and Susan, the moment she looked at my poor turned skirt – it is shiny, is it not, Miss Sharston? – she spoke about that trunk of clothes which is to arrive next week. She turned to the charming Miss Keys, and asked her to collect them."

"And you stood it, mother; you really stood it," said Florence, the colour coming and going on her face.

"My dear, good girl, beggars cannot be choosers. I have been absolutely at my wits' ends for clothes since Susan has been so thoughtless. I not only stood it, but on the way home I gave Miss Keys a hint as to the sort of things I wanted. I told her to try and smuggle into the trunk one of your aunt's rich black silks. She said she thought she could manage it, as she has at least four or five at the present moment, and never can tell herself how many she has. I told Miss Keys to let it be four in the future, and send the fifth on to me, and she laughed. She is a very clever, agreeable girl, and said she thought it could be done. I am made. I'll astonish the neighbours this winter."

"Come out, Kitty," said poor Florence, turning to her companion. She felt that, fond as she was of the little Mummy, she could not endure any more of her society for the present.

The moment the girls had departed, Mrs. Aylmer, who was standing on tiptoe near the window to watch them as they went slowly away in the direction of the beach, turned abruptly, went to the door of the little sitting-room, and locked it. She then put her hand into her pocket.

"Is it true? Have I the evidence of my own senses?" she thought. "I never met a nicer girl than Miss Keys. Of course, she did wrong years ago: but so, for that matter, did my own poor Florence. She really can be made of great use. That black silk will be invaluable, and..." Here the widow, from the depths of her pocket, brought out four sovereigns. "She says she can give me more by-and-by, and I am to influence Florence. Of course I will. Do I envy the poor child her post? By no means. As Florence cannot occupy it, as well she as another. That she is setting her cap at that handsome Mr. Trevor there is no doubt; but perhaps Florence can win him over her head. We will see about that. Anyhow, I am not going to injure the poor, dear girl, and I shall tell Florence so."

Mrs. Aylmer felt far too excited to sit down. From the depths of poverty she suddenly felt herself raised almost to a pinnacle of wealth, as she estimated it.

Four golden sovereigns and the faithful promise of one of Susan's best silk dresses. "There will be lots of odds and ends besides," thought the little widow. "I am made! I am made! Now, if I only could! if I only could!"

As she considered the possibility of a very definite line of action, she still continued to stand by the tiny window of the sitting room, and from this vantage-point she saw a young man in a grey tweed suit strolling slowly in the direction of the sea-beach.

"Mr. Trevor!" she said to herself; "Mr. Maurice Trevor, as gentlemanly-looking a young fellow as I have seen for many a day. He reminds me of poor dear Florence's father. He had just that downright sort of air, and he was fond of sticking his hands into his pockets too – yes, and he used to whistle, as I see that young fellow is whistling. I am always told that whistling is a good sign: it shows a generous disposition. If I am not greatly mistaken, that young man Maurice Trevor is generous and open-handed; he'll suit me. Now, if I could only introduce them! Florence and Kitty Sharston are on the beach – Mr. Trevor is going down to the beach. I'll go and take a walk. It is a fine evening, and it will do me good."

No sooner had this thought come to Mrs. Aylmer than she bustled into the kitchen.

"Well, ma'am," said Sukey, in a cross voice, "have you washed up the tea-things yet? We're in a rare mull this afternoon with those two young ladies in the house, and I can't do more than I said I would do. You promised that the tea-things should be your care, ma'am; and are they washed up? That's what I want to know."

"Oh, my dear good Sukey, don't worry about the tea-things now," said Mrs. Aylmer. "I am in no end of a flurry. A beautiful new black silk dress is promised to me, Sukey, and I am made in other ways too. You wash them up, and I'll give you threepence; I will – I promise you."

"You can't afford it, ma'am. What's the good of promising what you haven't got?" said the obdurate Sukey.

"I will; I declare I will, and I'll bring in something nice and tasty for supper. You wash the tea-things, there's a good soul!"

Mrs. Aylmer scarcely waited for Sukey's very indignant reply. The next moment she was out of the house.

She could walk quickly enough when she chose, and she knew every yard of the ground. Soon she was on the beach. Mr. Trevor was walking slowly in front of her. He was smoking a cigarette, his straw hat was pushed slightly forward over his blue eyes, his hands were still in his pockets, he was looking straight ahead of him, and as he slowly sauntered forward he was thinking. His thoughts were evidently not quite to his taste, for he frowned now and then, and looked over the wide expanse of sands, and occasionally he stood quite still. Thus Mrs. Aylmer found it easy to catch him up. She did so with a little pattering run which was one of her characteristics.

"Good evening, Mr. Trevor," she said, in her cheerful tone.

He started when she spoke to him, turned to look at her, and then took off his hat.

"Good evening," he said; "I did not recognise you at first."

"No wonder, as you only saw me for the first time to-day. I am taking a stroll; it is very pleasant here in the evenings, is it not?"

"Very pleasant! It is a charming place," said Trevor.

Mrs. Aylmer considered for a moment whether she should proceed on her walk alone, or whether she should try to induce the young man to accompany her.

"I am looking for my girls," she said; "they went down on the beach half an hour ago. Did you happen to see them, Mr. Trevor, as you were walking?"

"I have only just come out. I have not seen anyone," was his answer.

"Are you quite sure? I *know* they were going on the sands, my two girls, my daughter and her friend. I should like to introduce you to my daughter, Mr. Trevor."

"I should be pleased to know her," he answered, still speaking in that vague sort of way which showed that he was thinking of something else.

Mrs. Aylmer held both her hands before her eyes. Thus shaded from the evening sun, she was able to look long and steadily across the beach.

"I do declare I believe those two are the very girls we are looking for," she cried; "if you will come with me now (and I don't suppose you have anything special to do) I'll introduce you."

Trevor had, of course, no excuse to make. He was not interested in Mrs. Aylmer's daughter, nor in Mrs. Aylmer herself, but as well walk with her as alone. So the two stepped briskly across the sands.

"It was the greatest possible pleasure to me to meet you to-day," continued the little widow; "I am so glad that my poor sister-in-law has a bright young fellow like you to look thoroughly after her affairs."

"But I don't look after them," he said; "Mrs. Aylmer has been extremely good to me, but the person who manages her business affairs is that very clever young lady, Miss Keys."

"Oh, what a genius she is!" said Mrs. Aylmer; "a wonderful girl, quite charming."

"Do you think so?" answered Trevor. He looked at the little widow, and the faintest dawn of an amused smile stole into his eyes.

"Do I think so? I am immensely taken with her," said Mrs. Aylmer. "She is, I know, the greatest comfort to my dear sister-in-law. How splendidly Susan wears, and how considerate she is! I don't know what I should do without her. Mr. Trevor, I will say it, you are a very lucky person to be such a favourite."

"Mrs. Aylmer has done a great deal for me," said the young man; "she has after a fashion adopted me."

"And you are very glad, are you not?"

"Yes, I am glad," he replied. "Is that your daughter?" he continued, as if he wished to turn the conversation.

"That is my dear daughter Florence." Mrs. Aylmer spoke excitedly.

Florence and Kitty Sharston were seated on the edge of a rock. Kitty was poking with her parasol at some sea-anemones which were clinging to the rock just under the water. Florence was gazing with a frown between her dark brows at her mother and the man who was by her mother's side. If she could have fled, she would, but Mrs. Aylmer, who knew Florence's ways to perfection, now raised her voice to a shrill scream.

"Stay where you are, Florence; I am coming to sit with you, so is Mr. Trevor; don't stir until we come up."

Poor Florence's blush was so vivid that it was well it was too far off to be noticed. There was nothing for it, however, but to obey. Mrs. Aylmer came up in high good humour, and made the necessary introductions.

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. AYLMER'S STRATEGY

"Now, this is cosy," said the widow, "quite what I call friendly. I love these impromptu little meetings; all the stiffness which generally surrounds a first introduction must vanish when four human creatures find themselves face to face with Nature in her grandest aspects. Look at those great rolling waves, Mr. Trevor, and tell me if you ever saw anything finer in its way."

"Oh, mother, don't be a goose," said Florence. Try as she would, she could not help laughing. That laugh settled the matter. Trevor looked into her dancing eyes, noticed how white her teeth were, and, moving a step nearer, sat down by her side.

"Do you know this place well?" he asked.

"It has been my home for the greater part of my life," was Florence's reply.

She felt inclined to be rude to Mr. Trevor. The man who was adopted by Aunt Susan, who was doubtless the chosen and confidential friend of Bertha Keys, could surely have no interest for her! But Trevor had a gentle and very polite manner. It never occurred to him that this somewhat showy-looking girl could dislike his company. He was good-looking himself, and accustomed to being made much of and petted a good deal by women, and before many minutes had passed, Florence, in spite of herself, was chatting gaily with him.

She forgot that her mother had manoeuvred in the most open and brazen way to secure this introduction; she forgot everything but the pleasure of talking to a fellow-creature, who seemed to understand her sentiments, and also to approve them. When a young man approves of a girl's ideas, when he likes to look into her face and watch the sparkle of her eyes, she must be one in a thousand if she does not find him agreeable, sympathetic, and all the rest.

Presently Trevor suggested that he and Florence should go down on the beach, cross some low-lying rocks, and find a certain pool, which at low water contained the most lovely of sea-anemones to be found anywhere round the coast.

"Oh, come too, mother; come too, Kitty," said Florence, as she jumped to her feet.

"No, my dear, I am much too tired," said Mrs. Aylmer. She clutched at Kitty's skirt as the young girl was about to rise, and pulled her back, to her own astonishment.

"Stay by me, Miss Sharston: I have much to say to you," remarked the widow.

Accordingly Florence and Trevor, Florence well knowing that Kitty had not been allowed to come with her, started on their tour of investigation alone. They found the sea-anemones and chatted about them, and Trevor asked Florence if she would like to begin to make a collection, and Florence began by saying "Yes," but finally refused the tempting offer which Trevor made to help her in the matter.

"I am going to London in a few days," she said.

"To London?" he asked; "now, in this broiling weather?"

"Yes; why not? Don't you like London in August?"

"I never care for London at any time – in August it is particularly detestable," was his reply. "We are going to stay here for a day or two. I think you know Miss Keys; she told me that you were an old friend of hers."

"She was at the same school with me years ago," said Florence, flushing as she spoke. "Oh, do look at that beauty in the corner: a kind of dark electric-blue. What a wonderful creature! Oh, and that rose-coloured one near it! Sea-anemones are like great tropical flowers."

Meanwhile Mrs. Aylmer was consulting with Kitty.

"Shall we or shall we not ask him to supper?" she said. "What do you think?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Kitty. She looked at her companion with those innocent, wide-open grey eyes, which were her greatest charm.

"He has quite taken to Florence; don't you see for yourself?"

"Oh, yes; everyone takes to her," replied Kitty, with enthusiasm; "she is so nice and honest and downright."

Mrs. Aylmer sighed.

"She has had her troubles, poor child; but in the end things may come round in a most wonderful way. Do you know, I like him very much?"

"Like who?" asked Kitty.

"Really, Miss Sharston, you are a little silly – Mr. Trevor, Mr. Maurice Trevor, the adopted son of my wealthy sister-in-law, Susan Aylmer."

"Oh, yes," said Kitty; "I forgot that you were talking about him."

"I was asking you, my dear, if you thought we might invite him to join us at supper."

"Why not?" said Kitty.

"Well, Sukey's temper grows worse and worse. We were going to have a very small supper, not what you could put a man down to; but if he were coming you and I might just whip round to the shrimp-shop and get a lobster: lobster with a nice salad is what young men delight in; and we might get a bottle of claret at the grocer's. If you would carry the lobster, I would bring the claret. It is an enormous expense to go to, but if in the end –"

"Oh, dear," said Kitty, rising. She looked at Mrs. Aylmer, and the colour rose in a delicate wave all over her pretty face. "Oh, I would not," she said; "I don't think Florence would like it – I am certain she would not. Oh, you know her: she will be rude; don't do it, please, please don't."

But if there was one person more determined than another to have her own way, it was the little Mummy. She had only vaguely considered the possibility of asking Mr. Trevor to partake of their humble meal when she first spoke of it; now that Kitty opposed it she made up her mind that by hook or crook she would convey him to their house. What a victory it would be! Susan Aylmer, her rich sister-in-law, waiting and wondering why her handsome and fascinating young protégé did not appear: Bertha Keys finding her meal very dull without him: both these ladies talking about him, and in their hearts of hearts longing for his society: and he all the time in the tiny cottage, partaking of the humble fare of Mrs. Aylmer the less, with the naughty Florence close to his side, and the fascinating Kitty not a yard off. Oh, it was worth a struggle!

Mrs. Aylmer rose to her feet. A good stiff wind was beginning to blow, and she staggered for a moment as it caught her stout little person. Then she raised her voice: "Florence!"

"Yes, mother," said Florence, turning. She was a hundred yards away now, and Trevor was talking in a more fascinating way than ever about sea-anemones and their beauties.

"If Mr. Trevor would come back to supper with us, we should be much pleased to see him. I will expect you, dear, to bring him in, when you have done your little preambulation. So pleased if you will join us, Mr. Trevor."

All these words were shrieked on the sea-breeze. Florence made a reply which did not quite reach her mother's ears. Mrs. Aylmer shouted once more, and then, seizing Kitty's hand, turned in the direction of the little town.

"Now for the shrimp-woman and the grocer's shop," she said; "we must be as quick as possible. Sukey will be in a flurry: but never mind: it is worth the effort."

Poor Kitty had never felt more uncomfortable. Really there were times when the little Mummy was almost unendurable. A lobster was chosen, quite a nice expensive one; Kitty was desired to go to the nearest greengrocer's shop, in order to secure the crispest lettuce and half a pound of tomatoes; the bottle of claret was also bought, and, laden with these spoils, the girl and the elder lady re-entered the tiny cottage.

"Now then, Sukey," called out Mrs. Aylmer, "brisk is the word. I have caught the most charming young man you ever heard of, and he is coming to supper with us."

Sukey stared at her mistress.

"What folly are you up to now, ma'am?" she asked.

"No folly at all, my dear Sukey. Here's six-pence for you; don't say anything about it. Make the salad as only you know how, and trim the lobster. I was considerate, Sukey, and I got things that really will not give you trouble. Kitty, my dear sweet little girl, help me to arrange the table. It will be supper in a bower – quite romantic. The young man will enjoy it; I am certain he will. Dear Flo! what it is to have a mother like me to look after her and see that she does not waste her opportunities."

"But," said Kitty, changing colour as she spoke, "do you really mean – "

"I mean that mum's the word at present," was Mrs. Aylmer's mysterious remark. "Help me, Kitty Sharston, like a good girl, and for goodness sake don't make yourself look too pretty to-night. I don't want him to turn his attention to you, I may as well say so frankly."

Kitty earnestly longed for the moment when she should leave Mrs. Aylmer's cottage.

The supper was prepared, however; everything was arranged; and then the two ladies stood by the window watching for the return of the truants, as Mrs. Aylmer was now pleased to call Florence and Mr. Trevor.

Presently she saw her daughter coming up the somewhat steep path alone.

"Flo, Flo, child, where is he? is he coming?"

"Oh, no, mother," said Florence.

"Did you give him my invitation?"

"I told him he was not to accept it," said Florence. "Oh, dear me, mother, don't be silly. But, I say, what a nice lobster, and I am so hungry."

CHAPTER VII.

THE CHAINS BEGIN TO FRET

Meanwhile Trevor went slowly back to the hotel. He had enjoyed his talk with Florence; he liked her brusque way, she did not flatter him, and she was, he considered, a particularly attractive-looking girl. In Mrs. Aylmer's society he was made a great deal of and fussed over, and when that happens to a young man he always enjoys the sort of girl who snubs him by way of contrast. He thought Mrs. Aylmer the less one of the most extraordinary women he had ever met; but as he liked Florence, and was in the mood for a bit of an adventure, he would gladly have accepted her mother's invitation to supper if she had not tabooed it.

"You are not to come," said Florence, looking at him with her wide-open frank dark eyes; "mother is the soul of hospitality, but we are very poor: we have nothing proper to give you for supper, and I for one would much rather you did not come."

"I do not in the least mind what I eat," he said, in a somewhat pleading tone, and he looked full at Florence with his blue eyes.

"Nevertheless, you are not to come; it is only my mother's way: she always goes on like that with strangers. I never allow people to accept her invitations."

After this there was nothing more to be said, and Florence and Trevor bade each other a very friendly good-bye.

When Trevor reached the "Crown and Garter" he found that Mrs. Aylmer and Miss Keys were already at dinner. They had both wondered where he was, and Bertha Keys had been a little anxious and a little uneasy. When he came in, the faces of both ladies brightened.

"What makes you so late?" said Mrs. Aylmer, looking up at him.

"I had a bit of an adventure," he said. He drew his chair to the table. "There was a slight chance of my not coming in to supper at all," he continued. "I met that charming little lady who visited you to-day, Mrs. Aylmer."

"What?" said Mrs. Aylmer, dropping her knife and fork.

"I met her again, and she introduced me to her daughter and to another young lady who is staying with them. By the way, they are your relations, so the little lady told me, and she was very hospitable, and invited me to supper, and I should have been very glad to go if the young lady had not told me that I must not accept her mother's invitation."

Now, these remarks were anything but agreeable to Mrs. Aylmer, and still less did they suit Bertha Keys. Neither lady said anything, however, at the present moment, but each glanced at the other. After a time, Mrs. Aylmer stretched out her hand and touched Trevor on his sleeve.

"I am sorry you have made the acquaintance of Miss Florence Aylmer," she said.

"Sorry? Why?" he asked. "I consider her a remarkably nice girl."

"I regret to have to inform you that she is anything but a nice girl. I will tell you about her another time. It is quite contrary to my wishes that you should have anything to do with her: you understand?"

Trevor flushed. He had a way of looking annoyed at times, and he looked annoyed now. His silken chains sometimes fretted him a great deal. He often wondered whether he had done right in allowing himself to become Mrs. Aylmer's adopted son. Bertha, however, gave him a warning glance, and he said nothing.

Presently dinner was over, and Bertha beckoned to him to join her on the balcony.

"Shall we go out on the sands?" she said. "I have something I want to say to you."

"But Mrs. Aylmer has something to say to me also – something about that particularly nice girl, Miss Florence Aylmer."

"She will not say it to you to-night; she has a headache, and I persuaded her to go early to bed. I quite sympathise with you, too, about Florence; she is one of my greatest friends."

Trevor gave Bertha a grateful glance.

"I am so glad you like her," he said. "I was never yet mistaken about anyone, and I took to her frank ways. She looks like the sort of girl who will never deceive you."

Bertha gave a peculiar smile, which vanished almost as soon as it visited her face.

"Shall we meet, say, in twenty minutes," she said, "just by the pier? I must see Mrs. Aylmer to bed; but I can join you then."

"Very well," he answered.

Bertha left the balcony, and Trevor, lighting a cigar, tried to soothe his somewhat ruffled feelings. He had never liked Mrs. Aylmer less than he did at that moment.

"It is horrid when a woman runs down a girl," he said to himself; "such bad form, and, as to this girl, it is impossible Mrs. Aylmer can know anything against her."

Presently he looked at his watch, and prepared to keep his appointment with Bertha. He liked Bertha Keys very much; she was always jolly and good-tempered, and she often tried to smooth over matters when there was any little difference between himself and Mrs. Aylmer. When he reached the pier he found her waiting for him. It was a moonlight night, and the young couple began to pace up and down.

"What is it?" he said at last. "Have you anything special to say?"

"I know you are in a bad humour, and I am not surprised," she said.

"Listen, Miss Keys," said Trevor. He dropped his cigar, and turned and faced her. "I often feel that I cannot stand this sort of thing much longer: it is like being in chains. I would much rather talk the matter out with Mrs. Aylmer, tell her I am very much obliged to her for her kind intentions with regard to me, but that I would sooner carve out my own career in life and be indebted to no one."

"And how silly that would be!" said Bertha. "But what do you want Mrs. Aylmer to do?"

"To let me go. I feel like a captive in her train; it is not manly. I never felt more annoyed than when she spoke to me as she did this evening. It is horrid when a woman abuses a girl – such bad taste."

"You know how peculiar she is," said Bertha; "but you suit her better than anyone I know. You want her to give you money to allow you to live in town. I am sure I can manage it. I quite understand that you must hate being tied to her apron-strings."

"It is detestable," said the young man; "and if it were not for my own mother, who seems so happy about me, and so grateful to Mrs. Aylmer, I should break with her to-morrow."

"I quite sympathise with you," said Bertha. "You must have money, and you must go to town. You want to read for the Bar: I will see that it is arranged. Mrs. Aylmer is rich, but not rich enough for you to live all your life in idleness. It would break her heart now if you deserted her: she has gone through much."

"What do you mean?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Why does she dislike Miss Florence Aylmer?"

"I would rather not say."

"But she will tell me herself."

"I shall beg of her not to do so."

"By the way," said Trevor, after a pause, "is this girl Mrs. Aylmer's niece?"

"She is her niece by marriage. Mrs. Aylmer's husband was Florence Aylmer's uncle."

"Then in the name of all that is just," cried Trevor impetuously, "why should I have the fortune which is really meant for Florence Aylmer? Oh, this is unendurable," he cried; "I cannot stand it. I will tell Mrs. Aylmer to-morrow that I am obliged to her, but that I will not occupy a false position."

"You will do fearful harm if you make such a remark," said Bertha. "Something very sad happened a few years ago, something which I cannot tell you, but – " Bertha's lips quivered and her face was very pale.

"What is it? Having told me so much, you must go on."

Bertha was silent for a moment.

"What has Miss Aylmer done? If there is a frank, open-hearted, nice-looking girl, she is one. I do not care so much for her mother, but Miss Aylmer herself – I defy anyone to throw a stone at her."

"I own that she is a nice girl, a very nice girl; but once, once – well, anyhow, she managed to offend Mrs. Aylmer. You must not ask me for particulars. I want you to be most careful; that is why I have brought you out here to-night. I want you to be most careful to avoid the subject with Mrs. Aylmer. Florence offended her, and she has resolved never to see her and never to speak to her again. She is annoyed at your having made her acquaintance, and I doubt not we shall leave Dawlish to-morrow on that account. Be satisfied that Florence only did what perhaps another girl equally tempted would have done, but it was – "

"It was what? The worst thing you can do is to throw out innuendoes about a girl. What did she do?"

"She was not quite straight, if you must know – not quite straight about a prize which was offered in the school where she was being educated."

"She told me that you were a teacher in the same school."

"Did she?" said Bertha. Her face turned pale, but her companion was not looking at her at that moment. "Ah, yes, poor girl: that is how I happen to know all about it. It was hushed up at the time, and of course Florence has quite retrieved her character. It was nothing whatever but what a girl tempted as she was would do, but it settled her as far as Mrs. Aylmer was concerned, and if you do not wish to bring fresh trouble upon the niece you will avoid the subject with her aunt. That is what I wished to say to you."

"How can I avoid it? It is quite impossible for me to be long with Mrs. Aylmer and prevent her speaking about what she has made up her mind to tell me."

"I have been thinking of that," said Bertha; "the very best thing you can do is to go up to London to-morrow morning."

"I go to London to-morrow?"

"Yes; go away for the present. I will tell her that you have had sudden news of your mother: that she wants to see you; or you can leave her a note to that effect."

"But it would not be true." Trevor darted a keen glance at his companion.

Bertha coloured again.

"It is difficult to manage with people who are as quixotically straight as you are," she said, after a pause; "I want you to keep away for your own sake. If what I have suggested does not please you, think of something else."

"I will tell her that I wish for a change: that is true enough," he answered; "but how will that help me? When I come back, she will tell me the thing you do not wish me to hear about Miss Aylmer."

"Oh, I never said I did not wish you to hear it: I think it would be better for your peace of mind not to hear it: that is all. I have said that it was a little shady: that it happened years ago: that Florence has quite retrieved her character."

Trevor stamped his foot impatiently.

"I will not go away to-morrow," he said, after a pause. "I should like to see Miss Florence Aylmer again. I will ask her to tell me frankly what occurred some years ago."

"You will?" said Bertha, and now her face looked frightened.

"Yes," he answered, looking full into her eyes; "I will. She is perfectly honest. She can excuse herself if necessary. Anyhow, she shall have the chance of telling her own story in her own way."

CHAPTER VIII. BERTHA'S QUANDARY

It was by no means the first time that Bertha Keys had found herself in a quandary. She was very clever at getting out of these tight corners: of extricating herself from these, to all appearances, impossible situations; but never had she been more absolutely nonplussed than at the present moment.

When she and Florence had both left Cherry Court School her prospects had been dark. She had been dismissed without any hope of a character, and had, as it were, to begin the world over again. Then chance put Mrs. Aylmer the great in her way. Mrs. Aylmer wanted a companion, a clever companion, and Bertha was just the girl for the purpose. She obtained the situation, managing to get references through a friend, taking care to avoid the subject of Cherry Court School, and never alluding to Florence Aylmer.

Mrs. Aylmer was very sore and angry just then. She disliked Florence immensely for having disgraced her; she did not wish the name of Florence Aylmer to be breathed in her presence; she was looking around anxiously for an heir. With Bertha Keys she felt soothed, sympathised with, restored to a good deal of her former calm. By slow degrees she told Bertha almost all of her history; in particular she consulted with Bertha on the subject of an heir.

"I must leave my money to someone," she said; "I hate the idea of giving it to charities. Charity, in my opinion, begins at home."

"That is does, truly," answered Bertha, her queer green-grey eyes fixed on her employer's face.

"And Florence Aylmer being completely out of the question," continued Mrs. Aylmer, "and Florence's mother being about the biggest fool that ever breathed, I must look in another direction for my heir."

"Why not adopt a boy?" said Bertha, on one of these occasions.

"Adopt a boy? a boy?"

"Well, a young man," said Bertha, colouring.

"What a very extraordinary idea!" was Mrs. Aylmer's response. She looked withering things at Bertha, and this young lady found herself more or less in disgrace for the next few days. Nevertheless, the idea took root. Mrs. Aylmer, having found girls failures, began to think that all that was desirable might be encompassed in the person of a boy.

"It would be nice to have a boy about the house. They were cheerful creatures. As they grew to be men, they were more or less a protection. Boys, of course, had none of the small ways of girls. A deceitful boy was a creature almost unknown."

So Mrs. Aylmer thought, and she began to look around for a suitable boy to adopt and leave her money to. No sooner did she seriously contemplate this idea than the opportunity to adopt a very special boy occurred to her. She had an old friend, a great friend, a woman whom as a girl she had really loved. This woman was now a widow: she was a certain Mrs. Trevor. She had married an army man, who had died gloriously in battle. He had won his V. C. before he departed to a better world. His widow had a small pension, and one son. Mrs. Trevor happened just about this very time to write to Mrs. Aylmer. She told her of her great and abiding sorrow, and spoke with the deepest delight and admiration of her boy.

"Send Maurice to spend a week with me," was Mrs. Aylmer's telegraphic reply to this epistle.

In some astonishment, Mrs. Trevor packed up her boy's things – he was a lad of eighteen at this time – and sent him off to visit Mrs. Aylmer in her beautiful country place.

Maurice Trevor was frank, innocent, open as the day. He pleased the widow because he did not try to please her in the least. He liked Bertha Keys because all apparently amiable people suited him, and Bertha certainly did look distinctly amiable. Soon she got into his confidence, and he talked of

his future. He wanted to go into the army, as his father had done before him. Bertha suggested that he should tell his desire to Mrs. Aylmer. This Maurice Trevor would not think of doing. He spent a week, a fortnight, a month with the widow, and went back to his mother, having secured a great deal more than he bargained for in the course of his visit.

Mrs. Aylmer now wrote to Mrs. Trevor, said that she liked Maurice very much, that she had no heir to leave her money to, and that if Maurice really turned out quite to her satisfaction she would make him her future heir. He must live with her during the holidays; he must give up his mother's society, except for a very short time in the year; he must be thoroughly well educated; must, on no account, enter the army; and must have a University education.

These terms, generous in themselves, were eagerly accepted by the all but penniless widow. She had some difficulty, however, in persuading young Trevor to, as he expressed it, sell his independence. In the end her wishes prevailed. He went to Trinity College, Cambridge, took honours there, and now at four-and-twenty years of age was to a certain extent his own master, and yet was more tied and fettered than almost any other young man he knew. To tell the truth, he hated his own position. Mrs. Aylmer was capricious; she considered that he owed her undying gratitude: that he should only do what she wished. He had little or no control of her affairs, Bertha Keys being the true mistress.

At the time when this story opens he felt that he could scarcely stand his silken fetters any longer.

Bertha, as she stood now in the moonlit window of her little room at the "Crown and Garter," thought over Maurice Trevor, his future prospects, and his past life. She also thought about Florence.

"From the way he spoke to-night," thought this astute young woman, "very, very little would make him fall in love with Florence. Now, that is quite the very last thing to be desired. It would be a sort of revenge on Mrs. Aylmer, but it cannot be permitted for a single moment. They must not meet again. There are several reasons against that. In the first place, it would not suit my convenience. I mean to inherit Mrs. Aylmer's property, either as the heiress in my own person or as the wife of Maurice Trevor. It is true that I am older than he, but I have three times his sense: I can manage him if another girl does not interfere. He must leave here immediately. I must make some excuse. His mother is not quite so quixotic as he is; I must manage things through her. One thing, at least, I am resolved on: he must not hear the story of Florence – at least, not through Florence herself: he must not meet her again, and Mrs. Aylmer must not tell him the story of what occurred at Cherry Court School."

Bertha thought a very long time.

"If he really falls in love with Florence, then he must no longer be Mrs. Aylmer's heir," she said to herself; "but he shall not meet her. I like him: I want him for myself; when the time comes, I will marry him. He shall not marry another woman and inherit all Mrs. Aylmer's property."

Bertha stayed up for some time. It was between two and three in the morning when at last she laid her head on her pillow. She had gone through an exciting and even a dangerous day, but that did not prevent her sleeping soundly. Early in the morning, however, she rose. She was dressed before seven o'clock, and waited anxiously for eight o'clock, the time when she might send off a telegram. She procured a telegraph form and carefully filled it in. These were the words she wrote: —

"Make some excuse to summon Maurice to London at once. Must go. Will explain to you when writing. Do not let Maurice know that I have telegraphed. — Bertha Keys."

This telegram was addressed to Mrs. Trevor, Rose View, 10 St. Martin's Terrace, Hampstead. Punctually as the clock struck eight, Bertha was standing at the telegraph-office; it was so early that she knew the line would be more or less clear. She sent off her telegram and returned with a good appetite to breakfast.

At about ten o'clock a telegram arrived for Trevor. He was eating his breakfast in his usual lazy fashion, and was inwardly wondering if he could see Florence again: if he could lead up to the subject of the school where she had suffered disgrace: and if she herself would explain to him that which was making him far more uncomfortable than the occasion warranted.

"A telegram for you," said Bertha, handing him the little yellow envelope. He opened it, and his face turned pale.

"How queer!" he said; "this is from mother; she wants me to come up to-day: says it is urgent. What shall I do, Miss Keys?"

"Why, go, of course," said Bertha; "here is Mrs. Aylmer. Mrs. Aylmer, Mr. Trevor has had an urgent telegram from his mother. She wants to see him."

Mrs. Aylmer looked annoyed.

"I wanted you to come with me this morning, Maurice," she said, "on an expedition to Warren's Cove. I thought you might drive me in a pony carriage."

"I can do that," said Bertha, in her brisk way.

"Of course you can, my dear, if Maurice feels that he really must go. – When can you be back again?"

"I will try and return to-morrow," said Trevor; "but, of course, it depends on what really ails mother. From the tone of her telegram I should say she was ill."

"And I should say nothing of the kind," answered Mrs. Aylmer shortly; "she is one of those faddists who are always imagining that they require –"

"Hush!" said Trevor, in a stern voice.

"What do you mean by 'hush?'"

"I would rather you did not say anything against my mother, please."

He spoke with such harshness and such determination that Bertha trembled in her shoes, but Mrs. Aylmer gave him a glance of admiration.

"You are a good boy to stand up for her," she said; "yes, go, by all means: only return to me, your second mother, as soon as you can."

"Thanks," he answered, softening a little; but the gloomy look did not leave his face.

"I will walk with you to the station, Mr. Trevor," said Bertha, who thought that he required soothing, and felt that she was quite capable of administering consolation.

"Thanks," he replied; "I shall ask the station porter to call for my portmanteau."

CHAPTER IX.

A TEMPTING OFFER

By the next train Bertha saw Maurice Trevor off to London. When she had done so, she went slowly in the direction of the sands. She had induced Mrs. Aylmer to put off her drive until the afternoon. Bertha was now very anxious to see Florence.

In all probability Florence would be on the beach: she would know that Bertha was coming to get the answer which Florence had not given her the day before. She walked slowly, holding her parasol up to shade her face from the sun, and thinking her thoughts.

"At any rate, Maurice Trevor is safe for the day," she said to herself; "and before the evening has passed, I shall have Florence's promise that she will not betray me to Mrs. Aylmer. Mrs. Aylmer is just the sort of person, if Florence made the worst of things, to turn against me and take Florence back again. Then indeed, she would be avenged, and I should be routed. Such a state of things cannot be."

Bertha thought quickly. Her thoughts turned to a little account which was weekly swelling in importance, and which stood to her credit in the Post Office Savings Bank. She was intensely fond of money, but she knew that the time had come when it might be necessary to sacrifice some of her savings. Presently she gave a well-assumed start; said: "Hullo, Flo, is that you?" and went to meet Florence Aylmer.

Florence's face was quite pale, and her eyes were red as if she had been crying.

"Goodness!" said Bertha; "what does this mean? Have you had any domestic calamity since I saw you last?"

"No, not any except what you are making," replied Florence. "I wish you would go away, Bertha: I hate to see you again. I wish you would leave me in peace."

"Well, darling, we return to Aylmer's Court to-morrow, so you will not be long worried by us. I have just been seeing that nice young fellow, Maurice Trevor, off to town."

"Indeed," answered Florence.

"Don't you like him extremely?" continued Bertha, giving her companion a quick glance.

"I scarcely know him," replied Florence.

"But you do just know him. How did you become acquainted with him?"

"My mother introduced him."

"Ah! just like the little widow," said Bertha, in a thoughtful voice. "Well, Flo, you and I have a good deal to say to each other. Let us walk to the other end of the sands, where we shall be alone."

Florence hesitated. For a moment she looked as if she were going to refuse; then she said, in an almost sulky tone: "Very well." They turned in that direction and walked slowly. At last they reached the spot where Mrs. Aylmer had discovered Kitty and Florence the day before.

"It was here I first saw him," thought Florence Aylmer to herself. "What a true, good expression he had in his blue eyes. How upright he looked! How different from Bertha! Oh, what a miserable wretched girl I am! Why do I not tell Bertha that I do not fear her? Why should I put myself in her power?"

At last they reached the rocks.

"It is nice here, and quite romantic," said Bertha; "we can come to our little arrangement. You have made up your mind, of course, Florence, that you will not speak to Mrs. Aylmer of what you know about me?"

"I do not see why I should keep your secret for you," said Florence; "I do not particularly want to injure you, much as you injured me in the past; but at the same time why should I make a promise about it? The time may come when it will be to my benefit to tell Mrs. Aylmer what I know."

"At the present moment she would not speak to you. She hates you as she hates no one else in the world. Your very name is as a red rag to her. If I want to rouse her worst passions, I have but to allude to you. Even if you told her, she would not believe a word against me."

"I am not so sure of that. Mrs. Aylmer may be forced to listen to me, and if you rouse my evil feelings I may tell her just to spite you, Bertha."

"But you will not," said Bertha. "You want money badly. You would like to be independent."

"That is quite true."

"You have had a fairly good education and you want to earn your own living?"

"I mean to earn it."

"But you will require a little money until you do. Now, look here, Florence: I don't want to injure you. I know I did long ago; I did it for my own benefit. I was cast penniless on the world, and I was forced to invent all kinds of subterfuges to make my way. I pity girls who are placed as I was placed. I have now managed to get into a comfortable nest. As I said before, I am in your nest. It suits me, and I do not mean to go out of it; but I pity you, and I should like to help you. Will you borrow a little money from me?"

"Borrow money from you? No, no," said Florence; but she trembled as she said the words.

"I can quite conveniently lend you fifty pounds," continued Bertha, gazing as she spoke across the summer sea. "It is not much, but it is something. With fifty pounds in your pocket you can go, say to London or to any other large town and advertise what you are worth. You have, I presume, something to sell: some knowledge, for instance, which you can impart to others; or perhaps you have a talent for writing. Don't you remember our wonderful essay?"

"Don't!" said Florence; "don't!" She covered her face with her hands; the crimson colour had flooded her face.

Bertha gave a queer smile.

"Now, I could earn money by writing essays," she said; "very smart essays they would be, and I could earn money by writing stories. Suppose, suppose I write stories still, and send them to you, and you publish them as your own – how would that do? Why should you not? I like writing stories, and I do not want money, and you could polish them up if you liked and sell them as your own. That is an excellent idea. Will you do it? I am quite agreeable. I will furnish you with a short story, say, once a fortnight, or once a month. Will you take one with you and try to sell it as your own? I can do it in the evenings, and you shall have it. Don't you think that I am paying you well, now, to keep silence? I am offering you an honourable livelihood, and in the meantime there is the fifty pounds: you may as well have it; it will keep you until the money for the stories comes in, and you can pay me back when you like. I dare not appear before the world as a writer, for Mrs. Aylmer is hard to please, and she would not like me to write or to do anything but devote my time to her; but there are hours at night when she goes to bed which I can devote to your service. Now, what do you say? It seems to me to be a very good offer."

"It is a tempting offer, certainly," said Florence; "but I never thought of writing. I have no particular taste for it."

"Well, think it over," said Bertha, rising as she spoke, "and in the meantime I will send you the money this evening."

"Oh, I cannot take it; please don't."

"I will send it to you," said Bertha, in a gay voice; "it is quite arranged. Good-bye, dear; I wish you success. When you are a great writer we can cast up accounts and see on which side the balance lies. You quite understand? I have a gift in that way which I think can be turned to account. You will agree to do what I wish, will you not, Florence?"

"It is all horrible! I do not know what to say," answered Florence.

"I see in your eyes that you mean to accept; you cannot help yourself. You cannot possibly starve, and you will find when you go to London that the posts of teachers and secretaries are overfull; but the writer of clever short stories can always find a market for his or her wares."

Florence rose to her feet.

"I don't like it," she said; "I am thoroughly miserable. I wish there were some other way; but there is not."

"Well, try for yourself before you think of the story part; but, anyhow, you must take the fifty pounds – you really must."

Bertha rose, touched Florence lightly on her cheek, and before the other girl could say a word turned and left her. She walked across the beach now with a dancing step.

"I have scored a point," she said to herself; "Florence won't dare to tell. She is as certain to accept that fifty pounds as she is to eat her breakfast to-morrow morning. After all, I am very generous to her; but I see my way, I think, to win Maurice Trevor. I see my way to prevent these two becoming friends, and at the worst, if Maurice does meet Florence again, and does fall in love with her, I shall take good care that he is not Mrs. Aylmer's heir. It is but to alter her will and heigh presto! the riches are mine!"

CHAPTER X.

THE LITTLE MUMMY'S CURIOSITY

Florence did not return to the cottage until past the usual dinner hour. When she did so, her mother, who appeared to be very much excited, met her in the porch.

"There has come a little parcel for you," she said, "from the 'Crown and Garter Hotel.' I wish you would open it; I am quite curious: it is sealed. The messenger did not want to leave it when I told him that you were out. He said it had been given him by Miss Keys to bring to you, and that he was to give it into your hands. I wonder what it can be?"

"Oh, it is nothing of importance," said Florence, turning quite pale. "Give it to me, please, mother."

"Nothing of importance, indeed!" said the little widow, tossing her head; "it seemed to me very much of importance. The messenger was quite fussed when he found you were not here: he said perhaps he had better take it back, but I assured him that I did not lose things when they were addressed to my only daughter, and that he might safely trust me to put the parcel into your hands. He was one of the waiters from the hotel – a very stylish-looking person indeed. What riches and what luck follow some people! Why should Miss Keys have everything and my poor girl be left out in the cold?"

"Oh, mother, I would not change with Bertha Keys for anything," said Florence; "but give me the parcel, please."

"Here it is; you'll open it and assuage my curiosity."

"It is only a letter from Bertha; I quite know what it contains," said Florence. She got red first and then pale. Her mother's bright beady eyes were fixed on her face.

"Well, but can't you open it and tell me about it? You know how curiosity does eat into me: I can't sleep, I can't enjoy my food when there's a secret surrounding me. What's in the letter, Flo? If you are too tired to read it just now, I will open it for you."

"No, thank you, mother; I know what it contains: it is a message from Miss Keys. I met her on the sands this morning and – and she said she would write."

With a wild fluttering at her heart, Florence popped the sealed packet into her pocket and sat down near the door.

"I am thoroughly tired," she said, "and my head aches."

Mrs. Aylmer appeared to be annoyed and disappointed.

"I do declare," she exclaimed, "I don't think any of the girls of the present day have health worth mentioning. There's Kitty: she's been fretting and fuming because you went out without her; she's a nice, refined sort of little thing, but she has a headache, and now after preparing the very nicest little dinner out of the scraps which that young man ought to have eaten last night, you never came in to partake. I had lobster salad of the most *recherché* description, and you were not present, while Kitty could scarcely eat because of her headache, so I had to do justice to the mayonnaise myself; and now you come in looking washed out and wretched. I do declare," she concluded, "things are more comfortable for me when Sukey and I are alone."

"Well, mother, I shall be leaving you shortly. I shall probably be going to London to-morrow or next day."

"So soon, after arranging to spend the holidays with me?"

"I have changed my mind about that now," said Florence restlessly; "I must work and begin to earn money."

"I have not a penny to give you to start with, you understand that."

"I have a little money," said Florence, and her face coloured and then turned pale: "I think I can manage."

"I wonder how," thought the widow. She glanced at Florence, but did not speak: a shrewd expression came into her eyes and she pursed up her lips.

"I will go and coax Sukey to make a cup of coffee for you," she said: "there is nothing like really strong coffee as a cure for a headache, and you can have some bread-and-butter. I am sorry to say I can afford nothing else for your dinner to-day."

"Oh, coffee and bread-and-butter will do splendidly," said Florence.

Her mother left the room. A moment later Kitty came down.

"Flo," she said, "I have just received a letter from father; he will reach Southampton to-morrow and I am to go and meet him there. Won't you come too?"

"Oh, may I go with you?" said Florence, sensibly brightening.

"May you? Of course you may; it will be so splendid to see him again, and you must constantly stay with me – constantly, Flo dear. Oh, I am so happy, so happy!"

CHAPTER XI. FLORENCE'S GOOD ANGEL

"What is the matter, Flo?" said Kitty. The two girls were in their tiny bed-room. They were to leave Dawlish the next morning, as Kitty had persuaded Florence to go with her to Southampton in order that they might both be present when Colonel Sharston once more set foot on his native land.

Kitty was very much excited, but she was too gentle and noble a girl, too absolutely unselfish, not to notice that her companion was distraught and anxious. No one could be much more worried than poor Florence was that evening.

All during the long day which had followed she had kept saying to herself: "Shall I or shall I not? Shall I take that fifty pounds from Bertha and put myself in her power for ever, or shall I return her the money, fight my way to fortune with the weapons which God has given me, and not descend to her temptations?"

One moment Florence had almost made up her mind to choose the right path, but the next instant the thought of the struggle which lay before her and the terrible adventures which any girl must meet who fights the world without money rose to weaken her resolve. It would be so easy to accept that fifty pounds, and Bertha would scarcely dare to ask her to repay it. She would at least have plenty of time to collect the money bit by bit, and so return it to Bertha; but Florence knew well that if once she took that money she would lower herself forever in the moral scale.

"I should sink again to that sort of awful thing I was just before my great temptation at Cherry Court School," she thought. "I have managed to rise above that level now, and am I going to sink again?"

So she wavered all day long, the pendulum of her mind now swinging to one side, now to another. The result was that she felt quite worn out when night came.

"What is it?" said Kitty. "What is worrying you?"

"Oh, never mind," answered Florence. The tears rose to her eyes, she pressed her hands for a moment to her face, then she said abruptly: "Don't ask me."

"I will ask you. I have seen all day that you are wretched; you must tell me what has gone wrong with you."

"I am tempted, that is all," said Florence.

"Then do not yield to the temptation," was Kitty's answer; "if it is something you would rather not say to me –"

"No, Kitty, I must not tell you, but I am tempted strongly," answered Florence.

"The only thing to do, however hard the temptation, is not to yield to it," said Kitty.

Florence looked for a moment at her companion. Kitty, too, had known what it was to want for money. Kitty had been poor. It is true that, since the day she took the prize which Florence through deceit had lost, her kind friend, Sir John Wallis, had never ceased to shower small benefits upon her. She was not only his pet, but almost his idol. In his heart of hearts he felt that he would like to adopt her, but he did not dare even to suggest such a thing, knowing how passionately she was attached to her father.

Now Colonel Sharston was returning to England, having been appointed to an excellent home post, and Kitty's money troubles were quite at an end.

"She will want for nothing in the future," thought Florence to herself as she looked at the graceful figure and bright beautiful face of the young girl who was standing a short distance away. "She will want for nothing: she will never know the real heartache of those who have to earn their daily bread. How can she understand?"

"Why are you looking at me like that, Flo?" said Kitty.

"Oh, I don't know; I don't know. I – sometimes I envy you. You have rich and powerful friends."

"Then it is money: I thought as much," said Kitty. "Listen to me, Florence. I am sure I can guess what is troubling you. That dreadful Bertha wants to bribe you to be silent: she has offered you money."

Florence's face turned quite pale.

"Give it back to her; you shall, you must! I know father will help you when he comes back. I will speak to him. You must not yield, Flo; you must not."

Florence stood irresolute.

"It is not too late," said Kitty. "We are both leaving here early in the morning. Has she sent you any money now?"

"Yes," said Florence. Her voice scarcely rose to a whisper. The word trembled on her lips.

"Then we will return it to her. You must not take it."

"It is too late: I have taken it."

"It is not too late. What is the time? It is only half-past ten. I am quite certain that Miss Keys is not in bed yet. Come, Flo, put on your hat; your mother won't mind. We will take the latchkey and let ourselves in. We will go to the hotel and return the money."

"Oh, I dare not."

"Then I dare," said Kitty. "You have told me nothing, remember; but I will not let you sink or yield to this temptation."

Florence colored crimson.

"You have a great power over me," she said; "I feel as if you were my good angel, and Bertha were my bad."

"Then for heaven's sake, Florence, yield to the entreaties of your good angel. Come, come; the hotel won't be shut up. Where is the money?"

"In my pocket."

"Then come immediately."

Florence was inspired by Kitty, whose voice was strong, and her face brave and bright, as befitted one who lived for the right and rejected the wrong.

"I am glad," she said to herself; "I did not ask her counsel: she has forced it upon me. She is my good angel."

A moment later the two girls left the cottage. They walked quickly in the direction of the big hotel. There were lights in many rooms, servants walking about, and the hall-door was open. They walked up the steps, and Kitty entered the hall. Florence followed her, pale and trembling.

"Can I see Miss Keys?" asked Kitty of the hall porter.

"I will enquire if Miss Keys is up still," replied the man. "What name shall I say?"

"Miss Sharston. I want to see her for a moment about something important."

"Will you come in, Miss?"

"No; perhaps she would see me here. Say also that Miss Florence Aylmer is with me."

The man withdrew. A moment later, Bertha, in her evening dress, looking pretty and excited, ran downstairs.

"What is it? What's the matter?" she said. "Is that you, Florence? Kitty, what is the matter?"

"We don't want to stay; we don't want you to tell Mrs. Aylmer, and we don't want to get you into trouble of any sort," said Kitty, speaking rapidly and drawing Bertha aside as she spoke. "But we want to give you this back, and to let you know that what you suggested was impossible – quite impossible."

As she spoke, she thrust the little packet which contained the fifty pounds into Bertha's hand, and then took Florence's.

"Come, Flo; I think that is all," she said.

Bertha was too stunned to say a word. Before she had recovered from her astonishment, the two girls had walked down the steps and gone out into the night.

"What does this mean?" said Bertha to herself. "I don't like it at all, but, thank goodness, we are leaving here to-morrow. I don't suppose Florence will really tell on me. I must discover some other way to get her into my power."

She went slowly back to the sitting-room. Mrs. Aylmer looked up discontentedly.

"Who called to see you? I didn't know you had any friends in the town, Bertha?" she said.

"Nor have I, but a couple of young girls who are staying here called to return me a little packet which I had dropped on the beach to-day and lost. They found it; my name was on it, and they brought it back to me."

"Oh, indeed; I thought I heard the waiter say that Miss Florence Aylmer had called."

"You were mistaken, Mrs. Aylmer," replied Bertha, in her calm voice. She fixed her grey-green eyes on the widow's face, and took up the book which she had been reading.

"Shall we go on with this, or shall we have a game of two-handed patience?" she said quietly.

"I will go to bed," said Mrs. Aylmer; "I am tired and cross. After all, my life is very dull. You didn't manage to amuse me to-day, Bertha; you were not like your old self; and then I miss Maurice. He has become almost indispensable to me. I hope he will return to-morrow."

"We shall probably find him before us at Aylmer's Court."

"I shall send him a telegram the first thing to-morrow to ask him to hurry home," said Mrs. Aylmer. "He is such a pleasant, bright fellow that life is insupportable without him. You used to be much more amusing than you are now, Bertha. Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing, my dear friend," said Bertha. She looked full at Mrs. Aylmer, and tears rose slowly to her eyes. Now, no one could possess a more pathetic face than Bertha when she pleased. Mrs. Aylmer was not a good-natured woman, she was not kind-hearted, she was not in any sense of the word amiable, but she had certain sentiments, and Bertha managed to arouse them. When she saw tears in her young companion's eyes now, she laid her hand on her arm.

"What is it, dear? I should be sorry to be cross with you. You are a very good girl and suit me admirably."

"It was just the fear that I was not quite suiting you that was troubling me," replied Bertha. "Say that again, kind, dear benefactress, and you will make me the happiest girl in the world."

"No one ever suited me so well. You are surely not jealous of my affection for dear Maurice?"

"Oh, no; I love him myself," said Bertha.

Mrs. Aylmer looked grave. She rose slowly.

"Ring for my maid, will you, Bertha? I shall go to bed; I am tired," said the great lady.

The maid appeared a moment later, and the two left the room together. As Mrs. Aylmer slowly undressed, she thought of Bertha's last words: "I love him myself."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Aylmer to herself; "she is ten years his senior if she's a day; nevertheless, I must be careful. She is a clever woman; I should be sorry to have to do without her, but I often wonder what her past was. I made very few enquiries with regard to her history. I wanted someone to be with me at the time, and she took my fancy."

Downstairs Bertha slowly unfastened the little parcel and looked at the five ten-pound notes which were rolled up within.

"After all, it's just as well that I should have this money by me as that I should give it to Florence Aylmer," she said to herself. "I must think of some other way to tempt her, and the money will be useful. I shall put it back into the post-office and wait awhile. She is certain to go to London, and equally certain to fail. I can tempt her with some of my stories. I will manage to get her address. Yes, clever as you think yourself, Florence, you will be in my power, and before many weeks are over."

CHAPTER XII.

ALONE IN LONDON

Florence and Kitty left Dawlish the next day and went to Southampton. There they met Colonel Sharston, and Florence had the great bliss of seeing Kitty's intense happiness with her father. They stayed at a hotel at Southampton for the best part of a week, and then the three went to London. Kitty and her father were going to Switzerland for a month's holiday. They begged of Florence to go with them, but nothing would induce her to accept the invitation.

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