

Meade L. T.

Frances Kane's Fortune



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Содержание

FRANCES KANE'S FORTUNE	5
CHAPTER I.	5
CHAPTER II.	8
CHAPTER III.	11
CHAPTER IV.	13
CHAPTER V.	16
CHAPTER VI.	19
CHAPTER VII.	22
CHAPTER VIII.	25
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	28

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FRANCES KANE'S FORTUNE

CHAPTER I. THE LETTER

It was a very sunny June day, and a girl was pacing up and down a sheltered path in an old-fashioned garden. She walked slowly along the narrow graveled walk, now and then glancing at the carefully trimmed flowers of an elaborate ribbon border at her right, and stopping for an instant to note the promise of fruit on some well-laden peach and pear-trees. The hot sun was pouring down almost vertical rays on her uncovered head, but she was either impervious to its power, or, like a salamander, she rejoiced in its fierce noonday heat.

"We have a good promise of peaches and pears," she said to herself; "I will see that they are sold this year. We will just keep a few for my father to eat, but the rest shall go. It is a pity Watkins spends so much time over the ribbon border; it does not pay, and it uses up so many of our bedding plants."

She frowned slightly as she said these last words, and put up her hand to shade her face from the sun, as though for the first time she noticed its dazzling light and heat.

"Now I will go and look to the cabbages," she said, continuing her meditations aloud. "And those early pease ought to be fit for pulling now. Oh! is that you, Watkins? Were you calling me? I wanted to speak to you about this border. You must not use up so many geraniums and calceolarias here. I don't mind the foliage plants, but the others cost too much, and can not be made use of to any profit in a border of this kind."

"You can't make a ribbon, what's worthy to be called a ribbon, with foliage plants," gruffly retorted the old gardener. "Master would be glad to see you in the house, Miss Frances, and yer's a letter what carrier has just brought."

"Post at this hour?" responded Frances, a little eagerness and interest lighting up her face; "that is unusual, and a letter in the middle of the day is quite a treat. Well, Watkins, I will go to my father now, and see you at six o'clock in the kitchen garden about the cabbages and peas."

"As you please, Miss Frances; the wegitables won't be much growed since you looked at them yester-night, but I'm your sarvint, miss. Carrier called at the post-office and brought two letters: one for you, and t'other for master. I'm glad you're pleased to get 'em, Miss Frances."

Watkins's back was a good deal bent; he certainly felt the heat of the sun, and was glad to hobble off into the shade.

"Fuss is no word for her," he said; "though she's a good gel, and means well – werry well."

After the old gardener had left her, Frances stood quite still; the sun beat upon her slight figure, upon her rippling, abundant dark-brown hair, and lighted up a face which was a little hard, a tiny bit soured, and scarcely young enough to belong to so slender and lithe a figure. The eyes, however, now were full of interest, and the lips melted into very soft curves as Frances turned her letter round, examined the postmarks, looked with interest at the seal, and studied the handwriting. Her careful perusal of the outside of the letter revealed at a glance how few she got, and how such a comparatively uninteresting event in most lives was regarded by her.

"This letter will keep," she said to herself, slipping it into her pocket. "I will hear what father has to tell me first. It is a great treat to have an unopened letter to look forward to. I wonder where

this is from. Who can want to write to me from Australia? If Philip were alive – " Here she paused and sighed. "In the first place, I heard of his death three years ago; in the second, being alive, why should he write? It is ten years since we met."

Her face, which was a very bright and practical one, notwithstanding those few hard lines, looked pensive for a moment. Then its habitual expression of cheerfulness returned to it, and when she entered the house Frances Kane looked as practical and business-like a woman as could be found anywhere in the whole of the large parish in the north of England where she and her father lived.

Squire Kane, as he was called, came of an old family; and in the days before Frances was born he was supposed to be rich. Now, however, nearly all his lands were mortgaged, and it was with difficulty that the long, low, old-fashioned house, and lovely garden which surrounded it, could be kept together. No chance at all would the squire have had of spending his last days in the house where he was born, and where many generations of ancestors had lived and died, but for Frances. She managed the house and the gardens, and the few fields which were not let to surrounding farmers. She managed Watkins, too, and the under-gardener, and the two men-servants; and, most of all, she managed Squire Kane.

He had been a hale and hearty man in his day, with a vigorous will of his own, and a marvelous and fatal facility for getting through money; but now he leaned on Frances, was guided by her in all things; never took an opinion or spent a shilling without her advice; and yet all the time he thought himself to be the ruler, and she the ruled. For Frances was very tactful, and if she governed with a rod of iron, she was clever enough to incase it well in silk.

"I want you, Frances," called a rather querulous old voice.

The squire was ensconced in the sunniest corner of the sunny old parlor; his feet were stretched out on a hassock; he wore a short circular cape over his shoulders, and a black velvet skull-cap was pushed a little crooked over his high bald forehead. He had aquiline features, an aristocratic mouth, and sunken but somewhat piercing eyes. As a rule his expression was sleepy, his whole attitude indolent; but now he was alert, his deep-set eyes were wide open and very bright, and when his daughter came in, he held out a somewhat trembling hand, and drew her to his side.

"Sit down, Frances – there, in the sun, it's so chilly in the shade – don't get into that corner behind me, my dear; I want to look at you. What do you think? I have got a letter, and news – great news! It is not often that news comes to the Firs in these days. What do you think, Frances? But you will never guess. Ellen's child is coming to live with us!"

"What?" said Frances. "What! Little Fluff we used to call her? I don't understand you, father; surely Ellen would never part with her child."

"No, my dear, that is true. Ellen and her child were bound up in each other; but she is dead – died three months ago in India. I have just received a letter from that good-for-nothing husband of hers, and the child is to leave school and come here. Major Danvers can't have her in India, he says, and her mother's wish was – her mother's last wish – that she should make her home with us. She will be here within a week after the receipt of this letter, Frances. I call it great news; fancy a young thing about the house again!"

Frances Kane had dark, straight brows; they were drawn together now with a slight expression of surprise and pain.

"I am not so old, father," she said; "compared to you, I am quite young. I am only eight-and-twenty."

"My dear," said the squire, "you were never young. You are a good woman, Frances, an excellent, well-meaning woman; but you were never either child or girl. Now, this little thing – how long is it since she and her mother were here, my love?"

"It was just before Cousin Ellen went to India," responded Frances, again knitting her brows, and casting back her memory. "Yes, it was six years ago; I remember it, because we planted the new asparagus bed that year."

"Ay, ay; and a very productive bed it turned out," responded the squire. "Fluff was like a ball then, wasn't she? – all curly locks, and dimples, and round cheeks, and big blue eyes like saucers! The merriest little kitten – she plagued me, but I confess I liked her. How old would she be now, Frances?"

"About seventeen," replied Frances. "Almost a grown-up girl; dear, dear, how time does fly! Well, father, I am glad you are pleased. I will read the letter, if you will let me, by and by, and we must consult as to what room to give the child. I hope she won't find it very dull."

"Not she, my dear, not she. She was the giddiest mortal – always laughing, and singing, and skipping about in the sunshine. Dear heart! it will do me good to see anything so lively again."

"I am glad she is coming," repeated Frances, rising to her feet. "Although you must remember, father, that six years make a change. Ellen may not be quite so kittenish and frolicsome now."

"Ellen!" repeated the squire; "I'm not going to call the child anything so formal. Fluff she always was and will be with me – a kittenish creature with a kittenish name; I used to tell her so, and I expect I shall again."

"You forget that she has just lost her mother," said Frances. "They loved each other dearly, and you can not expect her not to be changed. There is also another thing, father; I am sorry to have to mention it, but it is necessary. Does Major Danvers propose to give us an allowance for keeping his daughter here? Otherwise it will be impossible for us to have her except on a brief visit."

The squire pulled himself with an effort out of his deep arm-chair. His face flushed, and his eyes looked angry.

"You are a good woman, Frances, but a bit hard," he said. "You don't suppose that a question of mere money would keep Ellen's child away from the Firs? While I am here she is sure of a welcome. No, there was nothing said about money in this letter, but I have no doubt the money part is right enough. Now I think I'll go out for a stroll. The sun is going off the south parlor, and whenever I get into the shade I feel chilly. If you'll give me your arm, my dear, I'll take a stroll before dinner. Dear, dear! it seems to me there isn't half the heat in the sun there used to be. Let's get up to the South Walk, Frances, and pace up and down by the ribbon border – it's fine and hot there – what I like. You don't wear a hat, my dear? quite right – let the sun warm you all it can."

CHAPTER II. "THIS IS WONDERFUL."

It was quite late on that same afternoon before Frances found a leisure moment to read her own letter. It was not forgotten as it lay in her pocket, but she was in no hurry to ascertain its contents.

"Until it is read it is something to look forward to," she said to herself; "afterward – oh, of course there can be nothing of special interest in it."

She sighed; strong and special interests had never come in her way.

The afternoon which followed the receipt of the two letters was a specially busy one. The squire never grew tired of discussing the news which his own letter had brought him. He had a thousand conjectures which must be dwelt upon and entered into; how and when had Ellen Danvers died? what would the child Ellen be like? which bedroom would suit her best? would she like the South Walk as much as the old squire did himself? would she admire the ribbon border? would she appreciate the asparagus which she herself had seen planted?

The old man was quite garrulous and excited, and Frances was pleased to see him so interested in anything. When she had walked with him for nearly an hour she was obliged to devote some time to Watkins in the vegetable garden; then came dinner; but after that meal there always was a lull in the day's occupation for Frances, for the squire went to sleep over his pipe, and never cared to be aroused or spoken to until his strong coffee was brought to him at nine o'clock.

On this particular evening Frances felt her heart beat with a pleased and quickened movement. She had her unopened letter to read. She would go to the rose arbor, and have a quiet time there while her father slept. She was very fond of Keats, and she took a volume of his poems under her arm, for, of course, the letter would not occupy her many moments. The rose arbor commanded a full view of the whole garden, and Frances made a graceful picture in her soft light-gray dress, as she stepped into it. She sat down in one of the wicker chairs, laid her copy of Keats on the rustic table, spread the bright shawl on her lap, and took the foreign letter out of her pocket.

"It is sure to be nothing in the least interesting," she said to herself. "Still, there is some excitement about it till it is opened." And as she spoke she moved to the door of the arbor.

Once again she played with the envelope and examined the writing. Then she drew a closely written sheet out of its inclosure, spread it open on her lap, and began to read.

As she did so, swiftly and silently there rose into her cheeks a beautiful bloom. Her eyelids quivered, her hand shook; the bloom was succeeded by a pallor. With feverish haste her quick eyes flew over the paper. She turned the page and gasped slightly for breath. She raised her head, and her big, dark eyes were full of tears, and a radiant, tender smile parted her lips.

"Thank God!" she said; "oh, this is wonderful! Oh, thank God!"

Once again she read the letter, twice, three times, four times. Then she folded it up, raised it to her lips, and kissed it. This time she did not return it to her pocket, but, opening her dress, slipped it inside, so that it lay against her heart.

"Miss Frances!" old Watkins was seen hobbling down the path. "You hasn't said what's to be done with the bees. They are sure to swarm to-morrow, and – and – why, miss, I seem to have startled you like – "

"Oh, not at all, Watkins; I will come with you now, and we will make some arrangement about the bees."

Frances came out of the arbor. The radiant light was still in her eyes, a soft color mantled her cheeks, and she smiled like summer itself on the old man.

He looked at her with puzzled, dull wonder and admiration.

"What's come to Miss Frances?" he said to himself. "She looks rare and handsome, and she's none so old."

The question of the bees was attended to, and then Frances paced about in the mellow June twilight until it was time for her father to have his coffee. She came in then, sat down rather in the shadow, and spoke abruptly. Her heart was beating with great bounds, and her voice sounded almost cold in her effort to steady it.

"Father, I, too, have had a letter to-day."

"Ay, ay, my love. I saw that the carrier brought two. Was it of any importance? If not, we might go on with our 'History of Greece.' I was interested in where we left off last night. You might read to me for an hour before I go to bed, Frances; unless, indeed, you have anything more to say about Fluff, dear little soul! Do you know, it occurred to me that we ought to get fresh curtains and knickknacks for her room? It ought to look nice for her, dear, bright little thing!"

"So it shall, father." There was no shade of impatience in Frances's tone. "We will talk of Fluff presently. But it so happens that my letter was of importance. Father, you remember Philip Arnold?"

"Arnold – Arnold? Dimly, my dear, dimly. He was here once, wasn't he? I rather fancy that I heard of his death. What about him, Frances?"

Frances placed her hand to her fast-beating heart. Strange – her father remembered dimly the man she had thought of, and dreamed of, and secretly mourned for for ten long years.

"Philip Arnold is not dead," she said, still trying to steady her voice. "It was a mistake, a false rumor. He has explained it – my letter was from him."

"Really, my love? Don't you think there is a slight draught coming from behind that curtain? I am so sensitive to draughts, particularly after hot days. Oblige me, Frances, my dear, by drawing that curtain a little more to the right. Ah, that is better. So Arnold is alive. To tell the truth, I don't remember him very vividly, but of course I'm pleased to hear that he is not cut off in his youth. A tall, good-looking fellow, wasn't he? Well, well, this matter scarcely concerns us. How about the dimity in the room which will be Fluff's? My dear Frances, what is the matter? I must ask you not to fidget so."

Frances sprung suddenly to her feet.

"Father, you must listen to me. I am going to say something which will startle you. All these quiet years, all the time which has gone by and left only a dim memory of a certain man to you, have been spent by me smothering down regrets, stifling my youth, crushing what would have made me joyous and womanly – for Philip Arnold has not been remembered at all dimly by me, father, and when I heard of his death I lived through something which seemed to break the spring of energy and hope in me. I did not show it, and you never guessed, only you told me to-day that I had never been young, that I had never been either child or girl. Well, all that is over now, thank God! hope has come back to me, and I have got my lost youth again. You will have two young creatures about the house, father, and won't you like it?"

"I don't know," said the squire. He looked up at his daughter in some alarm; her words puzzled him; he was suddenly impressed too by the brightness in her eyes, and the lovely coloring on her cheeks.

"What is all this excitement, Frances?" he said. "Speak out; I never understand riddles."

Frances sat down as abruptly as she had risen.

"The little excitement was a prelude to my letter, dear father," she said. "Philip is alive, and is coming to England immediately. Ten years ago he saw something in me – I was only eighteen then – he saw something which gave him pleasure, and – and – more. He says he gave me his heart ten years ago, and now he is coming to England to know if I will accept him as my husband. That is the news which my letter contains, father. You see, after all, my letter is important – as important as yours."

"Bless me!" said the squire. The expression of his face was not particularly gratified; his voice was not too cordial. "A proposal of marriage to you, Frances? Bless me! – why, I can scarcely remember the fellow. He was here for a month, wasn't he? It was the summer before your mother died. I think it is rather inconsiderate of you to tell me news of this sort just before I go to bed, my dear. I don't sleep over-well, and it is bad to lie down with a worry on your pillow. I suppose you

want me to answer the letter for you, Frances, but I'll do nothing of the kind, I can tell you. If you encouraged the young man long ago, you must get out of it as best you can now."

"Out of it, father? Oh, don't you understand?"

"Then you mean to tell me you care for him? You want to marry a fellow whom you haven't seen for ten years! And pray what am I to do if you go away and leave me?"

"Something must be managed," said Frances.

She rose again. Her eyes no longer glowed happily; her lips, so sweet five minutes ago, had taken an almost bitter curve.

"We will talk this over quietly in the morning, dear father," she said. "I will never neglect you, never cast you aside; but a joy like this can not be put out of a life. That is, it can not be lightly put away. I have always endeavored to do my duty – God will help me to do it still. Now shall I ring for prayers?"

CHAPTER III. AFTER TEN YEARS

When Frances got to her room she took out pen and ink, and without a moment's hesitation wrote an answer to her letter.

"My dear Philip, – I have not forgotten you – I remember the old times, and all the things to which you alluded in your letter. I thought you were dead, and for the last three or four years always remembered you as one who had quite done with this world. Your letter startled me to-day, but your hope about me has been abundantly fulfilled, for I have never for a moment forgotten you. Philip, you have said very good words to me in your letter, and whatever happens, and however matters may be arranged between us in the future, I shall always treasure the words, and bless you for comforting my heart with them. But, Philip, ten years is a long time – in ten years we none of us stay still, and in ten years some of us grow older than others. I think I am one of those who grow old fast, and nothing would induce me to engage myself to you, or even to tell you that I care for you, until after we have met again. When you reach England – I will send this letter to the address you give me in London – come down here. My dear and sweet mother is dead, but I dare say my father will find you a room at the Firs, and if not, there are good lodgings to be had at the White Hart in the village. If you are of the same mind when you reach England as you were when you wrote this letter, come down to the old place, and let us renew our acquaintance. If, after seeing me, you find I am not the Frances you had in your heart all these years, you have only to go away without speaking, and I shall understand. In any case, thank you for the letter, and believe me, yours faithfully,
Frances Kane."

This letter was quickly written, as speedily directed and stamped, and, wrapping her red shawl over her head, Frances herself went out in the silent night, walked half a mile to the nearest pillar-box, kissed the letter passionately before she dropped it through the slit, and then returned home, with the stars shining over her, and a wonderful new peace in her heart. Her father's unsympathetic words were forgotten, and she lived over and over again on what her hungry heart had craved for all these years.

The next morning she was up early; for the post of housekeeper, head-gardener, general accountant, factotum, amanuensis, reader, etc., to John Kane, Esq., of the Firs, was not a particularly light post, and required undivided attention, strong brains, and willing feet, from early morning to late night every day of the week. Frances was by no means a grumbling woman, and if she did not go through her allotted tasks with the greatest possible cheerfulness and spirit, she performed them ungrudgingly, and in a sensible, matter-of-fact style.

On this particular morning, however, the joy of last night was still in her face; as she followed Watkins about, her merry laugh rang in the air; work was done in half the usual time, and never done better, and after breakfast she was at leisure to sit with her father and read to him as long as he desired it.

"Well, Frances," he said, in conclusion, after the reader's quiet voice had gone on for over an hour and a half, "you have settled that little affair of last night, I presume, satisfactorily. I have thought the whole matter over carefully, my love, and I have really come to the conclusion that I can not spare you. You see you are, so to speak, necessary to me, dear. I thought I would mention this to you now, because in case you have not yet written to that young Arnold, it will simplify matters for you. I should recommend you not to enter on the question of your own feelings at all, but state the fact simply – 'My father can not spare me.'"

"I wrote to Philip last night," said Frances. "I have neither refused him nor accepted him. I have asked him on a visit here; can we put him up at the Firs?"

"Certainly, my love; that is a good plan. It will amuse me to have a man about the house again, and travelers are generally entertaining. I can also intimate to him, perhaps with more propriety than you can, how impossible it would be for me to spare you. On the whole, my dear, I think you have acted with discernment. You don't age well, Frances, and doubtless Arnold will placidly acquiesce in my decision. By all means have him here."

"Only I think it right to mention to you, father" – here Frances stood up and laid her long, slender white hand with a certain nervous yet imperative gesture on the table – "I think it right to mention that if, after seeing me, Philip still wishes to make me his wife, I shall accept him."

"My dear!" Squire Kane started. Then a satisfied smile played over his face. "You say this as a sort of bravado, my dear. But we really need not discuss this theme; it positively wearies me. Have you yet made up your mind, Frances, what room Ellen's dear child is to occupy?"

CHAPTER IV. FLUFF

The day on which Ellen Danvers arrived at the Firs was long remembered, all over the place, as the hottest which had been known in that part of the country for many a long year. It was the first week of July, and the sun blazed fiercely and relentlessly – not the faintest little zephyr of a breeze stirred the air – in the middle of the day, the birds altogether ceased singing, and the Firs, lying in its sheltered valley, was hushed into a hot, slumberous quiet, during which not a sound of any sort was audible.

Even the squire preferred a chair in the south parlor, which was never a cool room, and into which the sun poured, to venturing abroad; even he shuddered at the thought of the South Walk today. He was not particularly hot – he was too old for that – but the great heat made him feel languid, and presently he closed his eyes and fell into a doze.

Frances, who in the whole course of her busy life never found a moment for occasional dozes, peeped into the room, smiled with satisfaction when she saw him, tripped lightly across the floor to steal a pillow comfortably under his white head, arranged the window-curtains so as to shade his eyes, and then ran upstairs with that swift and wonderfully light movement which was habitual to her. She had a great deal to do, and she was not a person who was ever much affected by the rise or fall of the temperature. First of all, she paid a visit to a charming little room over the porch. It had lattice windows, which opened like doors, and all round the sill, and up the sides, and over the top of the window, monthly roses and jasmine, wistaria and magnolia, climbed. A thrush had built its nest in the honeysuckle over the porch window, and there was a faint sweet twittering sound heard there now, mingled with the perfume of the roses and jasmine. The room inside was all white, but daintily relieved here and there with touches of pale blue, in the shape of bows and drapery. The room was small, but the whole effect was light, cool, pure. The pretty bed looked like a nest, and the room, with its quaint and lovely window, somewhat resembled a bower.

Frances looked round it with pride, gave one or two finishing touches to the flowers which stood in pale-blue vases on the dressing-table, then turned away with a smile on her lips. There was another room just beyond, known in the house as the guest-chamber proper. It was much more stately and cold, and was furnished with very old dark mahogany; but it, too, had a lovely view over the peaceful homestead, and Frances's eyes brightened as she reflected how she and Ellen would transform the room with heaps of flowers, and make it gay and lovely for a much-honored guest.

She looked at her watch, uttered a hurried exclamation, fled to her own rather insignificant little apartment, and five minutes later ran down-stairs, looking very fresh, and girlish, and pretty, in a white summer dress. She took an umbrella from the stand in the hall, opened it to protect her head, and walked fast up the winding avenue toward the lodge gates.

"I hear some wheels, Miss Frances," said Watkins's old wife, hobbling out of the house. "Eh, but it is a hot day; we'll have thunder afore night, I guess. Eh, Miss Frances, but you do look well, surely."

"I feel it," said Frances, with a very bright smile. "Ah, there's my little cousin – poor child! how hot she must be. Well, Fluff, so here you are, back with your old Fanny again!"

There was a cry – half of rapture, half of pain – from a very small person in the lumbering old trap. The horse was drawn up with a jerk, and a girl, with very little of the woman about her, for she was still all curls, and curves, and child-like roundness, sprung lightly out of the trap, and put her arms round Frances's neck.

"Oh, Fan, I am glad to see you again! Here I am back just the same as ever; I haven't grown a bit, and I'm as much a child as ever. How is your father? I was always so fond of him. Is he as faddy as of old? That's right; my mission in life is to knock fads out of people. Frances dear, why do you look at me in that perplexed way? Oh, I suppose because I'm in white. But I couldn't wear black on a

day like this, as it wouldn't make mother any happier to know that every breath I drew was a torture. There, we won't talk of it. I have a black sash in my pocket; it's all crumpled, but I'll tie it on, if you'll help me. Frances dear, you never did think, did you, that trouble would come to me? but it did. Fancy Fluff and trouble spoken of in the same breath; it's like putting a weight of care on a butterfly; it isn't fair – you don't think it fair, do you, Fan?"

The blue eyes were full of tears; the rosy baby lips pouted sorrowfully.

"We won't talk of it now, at any rate, darling," said Frances, stooping and kissing the little creature with much affection.

Ellen brightened instantly.

"Of course we won't. It's delicious coming here; how wise it was of mother to send me! I shall love being with you more than anything. Why, Frances, you don't look a day older than when I saw you last."

"My father says," returned Frances, "that I age very quickly."

"But you don't, and I'll tell him so. Oh, no, he's not going to say those rude, unpleasant things when I'm by. How old are you, Fan, really? I forget."

"I am twenty-eight, dear."

"Are you?"

Fluff's blue eyes opened very wide.

"You don't look old, at any rate," she said presently. "And I should judge from your face you didn't feel it."

The ancient cab, which contained Ellen's boxes and numerous small possessions, trundled slowly down the avenue; the girls followed it arm in arm. They made a pretty picture – both faces were bright, both pairs of eyes sparkled, their white dresses touched, and the dark, earnest, and sweet eyes of the one were many times turned with unfeigned admiration to the bewitchingly round and baby face of the other.

"She has the innocent eyes of a child of two," thought Frances. "Poor little Fluff! And yet sorrow has touched even her!"

Then her pleasant thoughts vanished, and she uttered an annoyed exclamation.

"What does Mr. Spens want? Why should he trouble my father to-day of all days?"

"What is the matter, Frances?"

"That man in the gig," said Frances. "Do you see him? Whenever he comes, there is worry; it is unlucky his appearing just when you come to us, Fluff. But never mind; why should I worry you? Let us come into the house."

At dinner that day Frances incidentally asked her father what Mr. Spens wanted.

"All the accounts are perfectly straight," she said. "What did he come about? and he stayed for some time."

The slow blood rose into the old squire's face.

"Business," he said; "a little private matter for my own ear. I like Spens; he is a capital fellow, a thorough man of business, with no humbug about him. By the way, Frances, he does not approve of our selling the fruit, and he thinks we ought to make more of the ribbon border. He says we have only got the common yellow calceolarias – he does not see a single one of the choicer kinds."

"Indeed!" said Frances. She could not help a little icy tone coming into her voice. "Fluff, won't you have some cream with your strawberries? – I did not know, father, that Mr. Spens had anything to say of our garden."

"Only an opinion, my dear, and kindly meant. Now, Fluff" – the squire turned indulgently to his little favorite – "do you think Frances ought to take unjust prejudices?"

"But she doesn't," said Fluff. "She judges by instinct, and so do I. Instinct told her to dislike Mr. Spens' back as he sat in his gig, and so do I dislike it. I hate those round fat backs and short necks like his, and I hate of all things that little self-satisfied air."

"Oh, you may hate in that kind of way if you like," said the squire. "Hatred from a little midget like you is very different from Frances's sober prejudice. Besides, she knows Mr. Spens; he has been our excellent man of business for years. But come, Fluff, I am not going to talk over weighty matters with you. Have you brought your guitar? If so, we'll go into the south parlor and have some music."

CHAPTER V. "FRANCES, YOU ARE CHANGED!"

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight – good – nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen – excellent! Oh, how out of breath I am, and how hot it is! Is that you, Frances? See, I've been skipping just before the south parlor window to amuse the squire for the last hour. He has gone to sleep now, so I can stop. Where are you going? How nice you look! Gray suits you. Oh, Frances, what extravagance! You have retrimmed that pretty shady hat! But it does look well. Now where are you off to?"

"I thought I would walk up the road a little way," said Frances. Her manner was not quite so calm and assured as usual. "Our old friend Philip Arnold is coming to-night, you know, and I thought I would like to meet him."

"May I come with you? I know I'm in a mess, but what matter? He's the man about whom all the fuss is made, isn't he?"

Frances blushed.

"What do you mean, dear?" she asked.

"Oh, don't I know? I heard you giving directions about his room, and didn't I see you walking round and round the garden for nearly two hours to-day choosing all the sweetest things – moss roses, and sweetbrier, and sprays of clematis? Of course there's a fuss made about him, though nothing is said. I know what I shall find him – There, I'm not going to say it – I would not vex you for worlds, Fan dear."

Frances smiled.

"I must start now, dear," she said, "or he will have reached the house before I leave it. Do you want to come with me, Fluff? You may if you like."

"No, I won't. I'm ever so tired, and people who are fussed about are dreadfully uninteresting. Do start for your walk, Frances, or you won't be in time to welcome your hero."

Frances started off at once. She was amused at Fluff's words.

"It is impossible for the little creature to guess anything," she said to herself; "that would never do. Philip should be quite unbiased. It would be most unfair for him to come here as anything but a perfectly free man. Ten years ago he said he loved me; but am I the same Frances? I am older; father says I am old for twenty-eight – then I was eighteen. Eighteen is a beautiful age – a careless and yet a grave age. Girls are so full of desires then; life stretches before them like a brilliant line of light. Everything is possible; they are not really at the top of the hill, and they feel so fresh and buoyant that it is a pleasure to climb. There is a feeling of morning in the air. At eighteen it is a good thing to be alive. Now, at eight-and-twenty one has learned to take life hard; a girl is old then, and yet not old enough. She is apt to be overworried; I used to be, but not since his letter came, and to-night I think I am back at eighteen. I hope he won't find me much altered. I hope this dress suits me. It would be awful now, when the cup is almost at my lips, if anything dashed it away; but, no! God has been very good to me, and I will have faith in Him."

All this time Frances was walking up-hill. She had now reached the summit of a long incline, and, looking ahead of her, saw a dusty traveler walking quickly with the free-and-easy stride of a man who is accustomed to all kinds of athletic exercises.

"That is Philip," said Frances.

Her heart beat almost to suffocation; she stood still for a moment, then walked on again more slowly, for her joy made her timid.

The stranger came on. As he approached he took off his hat, revealing a very tanned face and light short hair; his well-opened eyes were blue; he had a rather drooping mustache, otherwise his face was clean shaven. If ten years make a difference in a woman, they often effect a greater change in a man. When Arnold last saw Frances he was twenty-two; he was very slight then, his mustache

was little more than visible, and his complexion was too fair. Now he was bronzed and broadened. When he came up to Frances and took her hand, she knew that not only she herself, but all her little world, would acknowledge her lover to be a very handsome man.

"Is that really you, Frances?" he began.

His voice was thoroughly manly, and gave the girl who had longed for him for ten years an additional thrill of satisfaction.

"Is that really you? Let me hold your hand for an instant; Frances you are changed!"

"Older, you mean, Philip."

She was blushing and trembling – she could not hide this first emotion.

He looked very steadily into her face, then gently withdrew his hand.

"Age has nothing to do with it," he said. "You are changed, and yet there is some of the old Frances left. In the old days you had a petulant tone when people said things which did not quite suit you; I hope – I trust – it has not gone. I am not perfect, and I don't like perfection. Yes, I see it is still there. Frances, it is good to come back to the old country, and to you."

"You got my letter, Philip?"

"Of course; I answered it. Were you not expecting me this evening?"

"Yes: I came out here on purpose to meet you. What I should have said, Philip, was to ask you if you agreed to my proposal."

"And what was that?"

"That we should renew our acquaintance, but for the present both be free."

Arnold stopped in his walk, and again looked earnestly at the slight girl by his side. Her whole face was eloquent – her eyes were bright with suppressed feeling, but her words were measured and cold. Arnold was not a bad reader of character. Inwardly he smiled.

"Frances was a pretty girl," he said to himself; "but I never imagined she would grow into such a beautiful woman."

Aloud he made a quiet reply.

"We will discuss this matter to-morrow, Frances. Now tell me about your father. I was greatly distressed to see by your letter that your mother is dead."

"She died eight years ago, Philip. I am accustomed to the world without her now; at first it was a terrible place to me. Here we are, in the old avenue again. Do you remember it? Let us get under the shade of the elms. Oh, Fluff, you quite startled me!"

Fluff, all in white – she was never seen in any other dress, unless an occasional black ribbon was introduced for the sake of propriety – came panting up the avenue. Her face was flushed, her lips parted, her words came out fast and eagerly:

"Quick, Frances, quick! The squire is ill; I tried to awake him, and I couldn't. Oh, he looks so dreadful!"

"Take care of Philip, and I will go to him," said Frances. "Don't be frightened, Fluff; my father often sleeps heavily. Philip, let me introduce my little cousin, Ellen Danvers. Now, Nelly, be on your best behavior, for Philip is an old friend, and a person of importance."

"But we had better come back to the house with you, Frances," said Arnold. "Your father may be really ill. Miss – Miss Danvers seems alarmed."

"But I am not," said Frances, smiling first at Philip and then at her little cousin. "Fluff – we call this child Fluff as a pet name – does not know my father as I do. He often sleeps heavily, and when he does his face gets red, and he looks strange. I know what to do with him. Please don't come in, either of you, for half an hour. Supper will be ready then."

She turned away, walking rapidly, and a bend in the avenue soon hid her from view.

Little Ellen had not yet quite recovered her breath. She stood holding her hand to her side, and slightly panting.

"You seem frightened," said Arnold, kindly.

"It is not that," she replied. Her breath came quicker, almost in gasps. Suddenly she burst into tears. "It's all so dreadful," she said.

"What do you mean?" said Arnold.

To his knowledge he had never seen a girl cry in his life. He had come across very few girls while in Australia. One or two women he had met, but they were not particularly worthy specimens of their sex; he had not admired them, and had long ago come to the conclusion that the only perfect, sweet, and fair girl in existence was Frances Kane. When he saw Fluff's tears he discovered that he was mistaken – other women were sweet and gracious, other girls were lovable.

"Do tell me what is the matter," he said, in a tone of deep sympathy; for these fast-flowing tears alarmed him.

"I'm not fit for trouble," said Fluff. "I'm afraid of trouble, that's it. I'm really like the butterflies – I die if there's a cloud. It is not long since I lost my mother, and – now, now – I know the squire is much more ill than Frances thinks. Oh, I know it! What shall I do if the squire really gets very ill – if he – he dies? Oh, I'm so awfully afraid of death!"

Her cheeks paled visibly, her large, wide-open blue eyes dilated; she was acting no part – her terror and distress were real. A kind of instinct told Arnold what to say to her.

"You are standing under these great shady trees," he said. "Come out into the sunshine. You are young and apprehensive. Frances is much more likely to know the truth about Squire Kane than you are. She is not alarmed; you must not be, unless there is really cause. Now is not this better? What a lovely rose! Do you know, I have not seen this old-fashioned kind of cabbage rose for over ten years!"

"Then I will pick one for you," said Fluff.

She took out a scrap of cambric, dried her eyes like magic, and began to flit about the garden, humming a light air under her breath. Her dress was of an old-fashioned sort of book-muslin – it was made full and billowy; her figure was round and yet lithe, her hair was a mass of frizzy soft rings, and when the dimples played in her cheeks, and the laughter came back to her intensely blue eyes, Arnold could not help saying – and there was admiration in his voice and gaze:

"What fairy godmother named you so appropriately?"

"What do you mean? My name is Ellen."

"Frances called you Fluff; Thistledown would be as admirably appropriate."

While he spoke Fluff was handing him a rose. He took it, and placed it in his button-hole. He was not very skillful in arranging it, and she stood on tiptoe to help him. Just then Frances came out of the house. The sun was shining full on the pair; Fluff was laughing, Arnold was making a complimentary speech. Frances did not know why a shadow seemed to fall between her and the sunshine which surrounded them. She walked slowly across the grass to meet them. Her light dress was a little long, and it trailed after her. She had put a bunch of Scotch roses into her belt. Her step grew slower and heavier as she walked across the smoothly kept lawn, but her voice was just as calm and clear as usual as she said gently:

"Supper is quite ready. You must be so tired and hungry, Philip."

"Not at all," he said, leaving Fluff and coming up to her side. "This garden rests me. To be back here again is perfectly delightful. To appreciate an English garden and English life, and – and English ladies – here his eyes fell for a brief moment on Fluff – one must have lived for ten years in the backwoods of Australia. How is your father, Frances? I trust Miss Danvers had no real cause for alarm?"

"Oh, no; Ellen is a fanciful little creature. He did sleep rather heavily. I think it was the heat; but he is all right now, and waiting to welcome you in the supper-room. Won't you let me show you the way to your room? You would like to wash your hands before eating."

Frances and Arnold walked slowly in the direction of the house. Fluff had left them; she was engaged in an eager game of play with an overgrown and unwieldy pup and a Persian kitten. Arnold had observed with some surprise that she had forgotten even to inquire for Mr. Kane.

CHAPTER VI. "I WILL NOT SELL THE FIRS."

On the morning after Arnold's arrival the squire called his daughter into the south parlor.

"My love," he said, "I want a word with you."

As a rule Frances was very willing to have words with her father. She was always patient and gentle and sweet with him; but she would have been more than human if she had not cast some wistful glances into the garden, where Philip was waiting for her. He and she also had something to talk about that morning, and why did Fluff go out, and play those bewitching airs softly to herself on the guitar? And why did she sing in that wild-bird voice of hers? and why did Philip pause now and then in his walk, as though he was listening – which indeed he was, for it would be difficult for any one to shut their ears to such light and harmonious sounds. Frances hated herself for feeling jealous. No – of course she was not jealous; she could not stoop to anything so mean. Poor darling little Fluff! and Philip, her true lover, who had remained constant to her for ten long years.

With a smile on her lips, and the old look of patience in her steady eyes, she turned her back to the window and prepared to listen to what the squire had to say.

"The fact is, Frances – " he began. "Sit down, my dear, sit down; I hate to have people standing, it fidgets me so. Oh! you want to be out with that young man; well, Fluff will amuse him – dear little thing, Fluff – most entertaining. Has a way of soothing a man's nerves, which few women possess. You, my dear, have often a most irritating way with you; not that I complain – we all have our faults. You inherit this intense overwrought sort of manner from your mother, Frances."

Frances, who was standing absolutely quiet and still again, smiled slightly.

"You had something to talk to me about," she said, in her gentlest of voice.

"To be sure I had. I can tell you I have my worries – wonder I'm alive – and since your mother died never a bit of sympathy do I get from mortal. There, read that letter from Spens, and see what you make of it. Impudent? uncalled for? I should think so; but I really do wonder what these lawyers are coming to. Soon there'll be no distinctions between man and man anywhere, when a beggarly country lawyer dares to write to a gentleman like myself in that strain. But read the letter, Frances; you'll have to see Spens this afternoon. *I'm* not equal to it."

"Let me see what Mr. Spens says," answered Frances.

She took the lawyer's letter from the squire's shaking old fingers, and opened it. Then her face became very pale, and as her eyes glanced rapidly over the contents, she could not help uttering a stifled exclamation.

"Yes, no wonder you're in a rage," said the squire. "The impudence of that letter beats everything."

"But what does Mr. Spens mean?" said Frances. "He says here – unless you can pay the six thousand pounds owing within three months, his client has given him instructions to sell the Firs. What does he mean, father? I never knew that we owed a penny. Oh, this is awful!"

"And how do you suppose we have lived?" said the squire, who was feeling all that undue sense of irritation which guilty people know so well. "How have we had our bread and butter? How has the house been kept up? How have the wages been met? I suppose you thought that that garden of yours – those vegetables and fruit – have kept everything going? That's all a woman knows. Besides, I've been unlucky – two speculations have failed – every penny I put in lost in them. Now, what's the matter, Frances? You have a very unpleasant manner of staring."

"There was my mother's money," said Frances, who was struggling hard to keep herself calm. "That was always supposed to bring in something over two hundred pounds a year. I thought – I imagined – that with the help I was able to give from the garden and the poultry yard that we – we lived within our means."

Her lips trembled slightly as she spoke. Fluff was playing "Sweethearts" on her guitar, and Arnold was leaning with his arms folded against the trunk of a wide-spreading oak-tree. Was he listening to Fluff, or waiting for Frances? She felt like a person struggling through a horrible nightmare.

"I thought we lived within our means," she said, faintly.

"Just like you – women are always imagining things. We have no means to live on; your mother's money has long vanished – it was lost in that silver mine in Peru. And the greater part of the six thousand pounds lent by Spens has one way or another pretty nearly shared the same fate. I've been a very unlucky man, Frances, and if your mother were here, she'd pity me. I've had no one to sympathize with me since her death."

"I do, father," said his daughter. She went up and put her arms round his old neck. "It was a shock, and I felt half stunned. But I fully sympathize."

"Not that I am going to sell the Firs," said the squire, not returning Frances's embrace, but allowing her to take his limp hand within her own. "No, no; I've no idea of that. Spens and his client, whoever he is, must wait for their money, and that's what you have got to see him about, Frances. Come, now, you must make the best terms you can with Spens – a woman can do what she likes with a man when she knows how to manage."

"But what am I to say, father?"

"Say? Why, that's your lookout. Never heard of a woman yet who couldn't find words. Say? Anything in the world you please, provided you give him to clearly to understand that come what may I will not sell the Firs."

Frances stood still for two whole minutes. During this time she was thinking deeply – so deeply that she forgot the man who was waiting outside – she forgot everything but the great and terrible fact that, notwithstanding all her care and all her toil, beggary was staring them in the face.

"I will see Mr. Spens," she said at last, slowly: "it is not likely that I shall be able to do much. If you have mortgaged the Firs to this client of Mr. Spens, he will most probably require you to sell, in order to realize his money; but I will see him, and let you know the result."

"You had better order the gig, then, and go now; he is sure to be in at this hour. Oh, you want to talk to the man that you fancy is in love with you; but lovers can wait, and business can't. Understand clearly, once for all, Frances, that if the Firs is sold, I die."

"Dear father," said Frances – again she took his unwilling hand in hers – "do you suppose I want the Firs to be sold? Don't I love every stone of the old place, and every flower that grows here? If words can save it, they won't be wanting on my part. But you know better than I do that I am absolutely powerless in the matter."

She went out of the room, and the squire sat with the sun shining full on him, and grumbled. What was a blow to Frances, a blow which half stunned her in its suddenness and unexpectedness, had come gradually to the squire. For years past he knew that while his daughter was doing her utmost to make two ends meet – was toiling early and late to bring in a little money to help the slender household purse – she was only postponing an evil day which could never be averted. From the first, Squire Kane in his own small way had been a speculator – never at any time had he been a lucky one, and now he reaped the results.

After a time he pattered to his feet, and strolled out into the garden. Frances was nowhere visible, but Arnold and Ellen were standing under a shady tree, holding an animated conversation together.

"Here comes the squire," said Fluff, in a tone of delight. She flew to his side, put her hand through his arm, and looked coaxingly and lovingly into his face.

"I am so glad you are not asleep," she said. "I don't like you when you fall asleep and get so red in the face; you frightened me last night – I was terrified – I cried. Didn't I, Mr. Arnold?"

"Yes," replied Arnold, "you seemed a good deal alarmed. Do you happen to know where your daughter is, Mr. Kane?"

"Yes; she is going into Martinstown on business for me. Ah, yes, Fluff, you always were a sympathizing little woman." Here the squire patted the dimpled hand; he was not interested in Philip Arnold's inquiries.

"If Frances is going to Martinstown, perhaps she will let me accompany her," said Arnold. "I will go and look for her."

He did not wait for the squire's mumbling reply, but started off quickly on his quest.

"Frances does want the gift of sympathy," said the squire, once more addressing himself with affection to Ellen. "Do you know, Fluff, that I am in considerable difficulty; in short, that I am going through just now a terrible trouble – oh, nothing that you can assist me in, dear. Still, one does want a little sympathy, and poor dear Frances, in that particular, is sadly, painfully deficient."

"Are you really in great trouble?" said Fluff. She raised her eyes with a look of alarm.

"Oh, I am dreadfully sorry! Shall I play for you, shall I sing something? Let me bring this arm-chair out here by this pear-tree; I'll get my guitar; I'll sing you anything you like – 'Robin Adair,' or 'Auld Robin Gray,' or 'A Man's a Man;' you know how very fond you are of Burns."

"You are a good little girl," said the squire. "Place the arm-chair just at that angle, my love. Ah, that's good! I get the full power of the sun here. Somehow it seems to me, Fluff, that the summers are not half as warm as they used to be. Now play 'Bonnie Dundee' – it will be a treat to hear you."

Fluff fingered her guitar lovingly. Then she looked up into the wizened, discontented face of the old man opposite to her.

"Play," said the squire. "Why don't you begin?"

"Only that I'm thinking," said the spoiled child, tapping her foot petulantly. "Squire, I can't help saying it – I don't think you are quite fair to Frances."

"Eh, what?" said Squire Kane, in a voice of astonishment. "Highly-tighty, what next! Go on with your playing, miss."

"No, I won't! It isn't right of you to say she's not sympathetic."

"Not right of me! What next, I wonder! Let me tell you, Fluff, that although you're a charming little chit, you are a very saucy one."

"I don't care whether I'm saucy or not. You ought not to be unfair to Frances."

These rebellious speeches absolutely made the squire sit upright in his chair.

"What do you know about it?" he queried.

"Because she is sympathetic; she has the dearest, tenderest, most unselfish heart in the world. Oh, she's a darling! I love her!"

"Go on with your playing, Fluff," said the squire.

Two bright spots of surprise and anger burned on his cheeks, but there was also a reflective look on his face.

Fluff's eyes blazed. Her fair cheeks crimsoned, and she tried to thunder out a spirited battle march on her poor little guitar.

CHAPTER VII. NO OTHER WAY

Arnold went quickly round to the back of the house. Although he had been absent for ten years, he still remembered the ways of the old place, and knew where to find the almost empty stables, and the coach-houses which no longer held conveyances.

"This place requires about four thousand pounds a year to keep it up properly," murmured Arnold to himself, "and from the looks of things I should say these dear good folks had not as many hundreds. I wonder if Frances will have me – I wonder if –" here he paused.

His heart was full of Frances this morning, but it was also full of a strange kind of peace and thanksgiving. He was not greatly anxious; he had a curious sensation of being rested all over. The fact was, he had gone through the most hair-breadth escapes, the most thrilling adventures, during the last ten years. He had escaped alive, at the most fearful odds. He had known hunger and thirst; he had been many, many times face to face with death. For more than half the time of his exile things had gone against him, and hard indeed had been his lot; then the tide had slowly turned, and after five more years Philip Arnold had been able to return to his native land, and had felt that it was allowed to him to think with hope of the girl he had always loved.

He was in the same house with Frances now. She had not yet promised to be his, but he did not feel anxious. The quiet of the English home, the sweet, old-fashioned peace of the garden, the shade under the trees, the songs of the old-fashioned home birds, the scent of the old-fashioned home flowers, and the bright eyes and gentle voice of the prettiest little English girl he had ever seen, had a mesmerizing effect upon him. He wanted Frances; Frances was his one and only love; but he felt no particular desire to hurry on matters, or to force an answer from her until she was ready to give it.

He strolled into the stable-yard, where Pete, the under-gardener, message-boy and general factotum, a person whom Watkins, the chief manager, much bullied, was harnessing a shaggy little pony to a very shaky-looking market cart. The cart wanted painting, the pony grooming, and the harness undoubtedly much mending.

"What are you doing, Pete?" said Arnold.

"This yer is for Miss Frances," drawled the lad. "She's going into Martinstown, and I'm gwine with her to hold the pony."

"No, you're not," said Arnold. "I can perform that office. Go and tell her that I'm ready when she is."

Pete sauntered away, but before he reached the back entrance to the house Frances came out. She walked slowly, and when she saw Philip her face did not light up. He was startled, not at an obvious, but an indefinable change in her. He could not quite tell where it lay, only he suddenly knew that she was quite eight-and-twenty, that there were hard lines round the mouth which at eighteen had been very curved and beautiful. He wished she would wear the pretty hat she had on last night; he did not think that the one she had on was particularly becoming. Still, she was his Frances, the girl whose face had always risen before him during the five years of horror through which he had lived, and during the five years of hope which had succeeded them.

He came forward and helped her to get into the little old-fashioned market cart. Then, as she gathered up the reins, and the pony was moving off, he prepared to vault into the vacant seat by her side. She laid her hand on it, however, and turned to him a very sad and entreating face.

"I think you had better not, Philip," she said. "It will be very hot in Martinstown to-day. I am obliged to go on a piece of business for my father. I am going to see Mr. Spens, our lawyer, and I may be with him for some time. It would be stupid for you to wait outside with the pony. Pete had better come with me. Go back to the shade of the garden, Philip. I hear Fluff now playing her guitar."

"I am going with you," said Arnold. "Forgive me, Frances, but you are talking nonsense. I came here to be with you, and do you suppose I mind a little extra sunshine?"

"But I am a rather dull companion to-day," she said, still objecting. "I am very much obliged to you – you are very kind, but I really have nothing to talk about. I am worried about a bit of business of father's. It is very good of you, Philip, but I would really rather you did not come into Martinstown."

"If that is so, of course it makes a difference," said Arnold. He looked hurt. "I won't bother you," he said. "Come back quickly. I suppose we can have a talk after dinner?"

"Perhaps so; I can't say. I am very much worried about a piece of business of my father's."

"Pete, take your place behind your mistress," said Arnold.

He raised his hat, there was a flush on his face as Frances drove down the shady lane.

"I have offended him," she said to herself; "I suppose I meant to. I don't see how I can have anything to say to him now; he can't marry a beggar; and, besides, I must somehow or other support my father. Yes, it's at an end – the brightest of dreams. The cup was almost at my lips, and I did not think God would allow it to be dashed away so quickly. I must manage somehow to make Philip cease to care for me, but I think I am the most miserable woman in the world."

Frances never forgot that long, hot drive into Martinstown. She reached the lawyer's house at a little before noon, and the heat was then so great that when she found herself in his office she nearly fainted.

"You look really ill, Miss Kane," said the man of business, inwardly commenting under his breath on how very rapidly Frances was ageing. "Oh, you have come from your father; yes, I was afraid that letter would be a blow to him; still, I see no way out of it – I really don't!"

"I have never liked you much, Mr. Spens," said Frances Kane. "I have mistrusted you, and been afraid of you; but I will reverse all my former opinions – all – now, if you will only tell me the exact truth with regard to my father's affairs."

The lawyer smiled and bowed.

"Thank you for your candor," he remarked. "In such a case as yours the plain truth is best, although it is hardly palatable. Your father is an absolutely ruined man. He can not possibly repay the six thousand pounds which he has borrowed. He obtained the money from my client by mortgaging the Firs to him. Now my client's distinct instructions are to sell, and realize what we can. The property has gone much to seed. I doubt if we shall get back what was borrowed; at any rate, land, house, furniture, all must go."

"Thank you – you have indeed spoken plainly," said Frances. "One question more: when must you sell?"

"In three months from now. Let me see; this is July. The sale will take place early in October."

Frances had been sitting. She now rose to her feet.

"And there is really no way out of it?" she said, lingering for a moment.

"None; unless your father can refund the six thousand pounds."

"He told me, Mr. Spens, that if the Firs is sold he will certainly die. He is an old man, and feeble now. I am almost sure that he speaks the truth when he says such a blow will kill him."

"Ah! painful, very," said the lawyer. "These untoward misfortunes generally accompany rash speculation. Still, I fear – I greatly fear – that this apprehension, if likely to be realized, will not affect my client's resolution."

"Would it," said Frances, "would it be possible to induce your client to defer the sale till after my father's death? Indeed – indeed – indeed, I speak the truth when I say I do not think he will have long to wait for his money. Could he be induced to wait, Mr. Spens, if the matter were put to him very forcibly?"

"I am sure he could not be induced, Miss Kane; unless, indeed, you could manage to pay the interest at five per cent. on his six thousand pounds. That is, three hundred a year."

"And then?" Frances's dark eyes brightened.

"I would ask him the question; but such a thing is surely impossible."

"May I have a week to think it over? I will come to you with my decision this day week."

"Well, well, I say nothing one way or another. You can't do impossibilities, Miss Kane. But a week's delay affects no one, and I need not go on drawing up the particulars of sale until I hear from you again."

Frances bowed, and left the office without even shaking hands with Mr. Spens.

"She's a proud woman," said the lawyer to himself, as he watched her driving away. "She looks well, too, when her eyes flash, and she puts on that haughty air. Odd that she should be so fond of that cantankerous old father. I wonder if the report is true which I heard of an Australian lover turning up for her. Well, there are worse-looking women than Frances Kane. I thought her very much aged when she first came into the office, but when she told me that she didn't much like me, she looked handsome and young enough."

Instead of driving home, Frances turned the pony's head in the direction of a long shady road which led into a westerly direction away from Martinstown. She drove rapidly for about half an hour under the trees. Then she turned to the silent Pete.

"Pete, you can go back now to the Firs, and please tell your master and Miss Danvers that I shall not be home until late this evening. See, I will send this note to the squire."

She tore a piece of paper out of her pocket-book, and scribbled a few lines hastily.

"Dear Father, – I have seen Mr. Spens. Don't despair. I am doing my best
for you.
Frances."

"I shall be back before nightfall," said Frances, giving the note to the lad. "Drive home quickly, Pete. See that Bob has a feed of oats, and a groom-down after his journey. I shall be home at latest by nightfall."

CHAPTER VIII. FOR THE SAKE OF THREE HUNDRED A YEAR

For nearly another quarter of a mile Frances walked quickly under the friendly elm-trees. Then she came to some massive and beautifully wrought iron gates, and paused for an instant, pressing her hand to her brow.

"Shall I go on?" said she to herself. "It means giving up Philip – it means deliberately crushing a very bright hope."

She remained quite still for several seconds longer. Her lips, which were white and tired-looking, moved silently. She raised her eyes, and looked full into the blue deep of the sky; and then she turned in at one of the gates, and walked up an exquisitely kept carriage drive.

Some ladies in a carriage bowled past her; the ladies bent forward, bowed, and smiled.

"Why, that is Frances Kane," they said one to another. "How good of her to call – and this is one of Aunt Lucilla's bad days. If she will consent to see Frances it will do her good."

Frances walked on. The avenue was considerably over a mile in length. Presently she came to smaller gates, which were flung open. She now found herself walking between velvety greenswards, interspersed with beds filled with all the bright flowers of the season. Not a leaf was out of place; not an untidy spray was to be seen anywhere; the garden was the perfection of what money and an able gardener could achieve.

The avenue was a winding one, and a sudden bend brought Frances in full view of a large, square, massive-looking house – a house which contained many rooms, and was evidently of modern date. Frances mounted the steps which led to the wide front entrance, touched an electric bell, and waited until a footman in livery answered her summons.

"Is Mrs. Passmore at home?"

"I will inquire, madame. Will you step this way?"

Frances was shown into a cool, beautifully furnished morning-room.

"What name, madame?"

"Miss Kane, from the Firs. Please tell Mrs. Passmore that I will not detain her long."

The man bowed, and, closing the door softly after him, withdrew.

Her long walk, and all the excitement she had gone through, made Frances feel faint. It was past the hour for lunch at the Firs, and she had not eaten much at the early breakfast. She was not conscious, however, of hunger, but the delicious coolness of the room caused her to close her eyes gratefully – gave her a queer sensation of sinking away into nothing, and an odd desire, hardly felt before it had vanished, that this might really be the case, and so that she might escape the hard rôle of duty.

The rustling of a silk dress was heard in the passage – a quick, light step approached – and a little lady most daintily attired, with a charming frank face, stepped briskly into the room.

"My dear Frances, this is delightful – how well – no, though, you are not looking exactly the thing, poor dear. So you have come to have lunch with me; how very, very nice of you! The others are all out, and I am quite alone."

"But I have come to see you on business, Carrie."

"After luncheon, then, dear. My head is swimming now, for I have been worrying over Aunt Lucilla's accounts. Ah, no, alas! this is not one of her good days. Come into the next room, Frances – if you have so little time to spare, you busy, busy creature, you can at least talk while we eat."

Mrs. Passmore slipped her hand affectionately through Frances's arm, and led her across the wide hall to another cool and small apartment where covers were already placed for two.

"I am very glad of some lunch, Carrie," said Frances. "I left home early this morning. I am not ashamed to say that I am both tired and hungry."

"Eat then, my love, eat – these are lamb cutlets; these pease are not to be compared with what you can produce at the Firs, but still they are eatable. Have a glass of this cool lemonade. Oh, yes, we will help ourselves. You need not wait Smithson."

The footman withdrew. Mrs. Passmore flitted about the table, waiting on her guest with a sort of loving tenderness. Then she seated herself close to Frances, pretended to eat a mouthful or two, and said suddenly:

"I know you are in trouble. And yet I thought – I hoped – that you would be bringing me good news before long. Is it true, Frances, that Philip Arnold is really alive after all, and has returned to England?"

"It is perfectly true, Carrie. At this moment Philip is at the Firs."

Mrs. Passmore opened her lips – her bright eyes traveled all over Frances's face.

"You don't look well," she said, after a long pause. "I am puzzled to account for your not looking well now."

"What you think is not going to happen, Carrie. Philip is not likely to make a long visit. He came yesterday; he may go again to-morrow or next day. We won't talk of it. Oh, yes, of course it is nice to think he is alive and well. Carrie, does your aunt Lucilla still want a companion?"

Mrs. Passmore jumped from her seat – her eyes lighted up; she laid her two dimpled, heavily ringed hands on Frances's shoulders.

"My dear, you can't mean it! You can't surely mean that you would come? You know what you are to auntie; you can do anything with her. Why, you would save her, Frances; you would save us all."

"I do think of accepting the post, if you will give it to me," said Frances.

"Give it to you? you darling! As if we have not been praying and longing for this for the last two years!"

"But, Carrie, I warn you that I only come because necessity presses me – and – and – I must make conditions – I must make extravagant demands."

"Anything, dearest. Is it a salary? Name anything you fancy. You know Aunt Lucilla is rolling in money. Indeed, we all have more than we know what to do with. Money can't buy everything, Frances. Ah, yes, I have proved that over and over again; but if it can buy you, it will for once have done us a good turn. What do you want, dear? Don't be afraid to name your price – a hundred a year? You shall have it with pleasure."

"Carrie, I know what you will think of me, but if I am never frank again I must be now. I don't come here to oblige you, or because I have a real, deep, anxious desire to help your aunt. I come – I come alone because of a pressing necessity; there is no other way out of it that I can see, therefore my demand must be extravagant. If I take the post of companion to your aunt Lucilla, I shall want three hundred pounds a year."

Mrs. Passmore slightly started, and for the briefest instant a frown of disappointment and annoyance knit her pretty brows. Then she glanced again at the worn face of the girl who sat opposite to her; the steadfast eyes looked down, the long, thin, beautifully cut fingers trembled as Frances played idly with her fork and spoon.

"No one could call Frances Kane mercenary," she said to herself. "Poor dear, she has some trouble upon her. Certainly her demand is exorbitant; never before since the world was known did a companion receive such a salary. Still, where would one find a second Frances?"

"So be it, dear," she said, aloud. "I admit that your terms are high, but in some ways your services are beyond purchase. No one ever did or ever will suit Aunt Lucilla as you do. Now, when will you come?"

"I am not quite sure yet, Carrie, that I can come at all. If I do it will probably be in a week from now. Yes, to-morrow week; if I come at all I will come then; and I will let you know certainly on this day week."

"My dear, you are a great puzzle to me; why can't you make up your mind now?"

"My own mind is made up, Carrie, absolutely and fully, but others have really to decide for me. I think the chances are that I shall have my way. Carrie dear, you are very good; I wish I could thank you more."

"No, don't thank me. When you come you will give as much as you get. Your post won't be a sinecure."

"Sinecures never fell in my way," said Frances. "May I see your aunt for a few minutes to-day?"

"Certainly, love – you know her room. You will find her very poorly and fractious this afternoon. Will you tell her that you are coming to live with her, Frances?"

"No; that would be cruel, for I may not be able to come, after all. Still, I think I shall spend some time in doing my utmost to help you and yours, Carrie."

"God bless you, dear! Now run up to auntie. You will find me in the summer-house whenever you like to come down. I hope you will spend the afternoon with me, Frances, and have tea; I can send you home in the evening."

"You are very kind, Carrie, but I must not stay. I will say good-bye to you now, for I must go back to Martinstown for a few minutes early this afternoon. Good-bye, thank you. You are evidently a very real friend in need."

Frances kissed Mrs. Passmore, and then ran lightly up the broad and richly carpeted stairs. Her footsteps made no sound on the thick Axminster. She flitted past down a long gallery hung with portraits, presently stopped before a baize door, paused for a second, then opened it swiftly and went in.

She found herself in an anteroom, darkened and rendered cool with soft green silk drapery. The anteroom led to a large room beyond. She tapped at the door of the inside room, and an austere-looking woman dressed as a nurse opened it immediately. Her face lighted up when she saw Frances.

"Miss Kane, you're just the person of all others my mistress would like to see. Walk in, miss, please. Can you stay for half an hour? If so, I'll leave you."

"Yes, Jennings. I am sorry Mrs. Carnegie is so ill to-day."

Then she stepped across the carpeted floor, the door was closed behind her, and she found herself in the presence of a tall thin woman, who was lying full length on a sofa by the open window. Never was there a more peevish face than the invalid wore. Her brows were slightly drawn together, her lips had fretful curves; the pallor of great pain, of intense nervous suffering, dwelt on her brow. Frances went softly up to her.

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