

Coleridge Christabel Rose

Kingsworth: or, The Aim of a Life



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Coleridge Christabel R. Christabel Rose Kingsworth; or, The Aim of a Life

Chapter One The Heirs of Kingsworth

Kingsworth was a moderate-sized old-fashioned house, standing amid bare undulating downs above a low line of chalky cliffs and looking over the sea. It was enclosed in a piece of barren down, which young half-grown trees were struggling to turn into a park – trees that the wind blew all in one direction, and forced into strange shapes and attitudes. Almost on the edge of the cliff was a bit of ruined tower, and down below the slope of the park and sheltered by the hill from the wind was a little village, untidy rather than picturesque.

The rooms in Kingsworth House were small and dark; the situation, save in sparkling sunshine, was bleak and dreary; yet its possession had been the aim of a whole life's work – and would be a matter of infinite importance to those whose fortunes these pages are intended to follow.

Kingsworth House had once been Kingsworth Castle, when the ruined tower had been whole and inhabited, and the family traditions were both ancient and honourable. But early in the 18th century, between political changes and personal extravagance Walter Kingsworth was ruined, and the family place sold to a stranger. He left two sons, who set to work in various ways to earn their living. The younger went into trade; in due time his family made their fortune, and his grandson fulfilled a long-standing ambition and bought back the family place. Their old house had been pulled down and the present one built by the intermediate owners; but the Kingsworths of Kingsworth came back very naturally to their place in the county, the rich merchant's son closed his connection with the business that had made his father's fortune – and the two young men, the purchaser's grandsons, who were lounging about in the little dark library one windy sunny March morning, had no thought but that their family place was an inalienable inheritance.

With the elder branch of the Kingsworths they had only a little occasional intercourse, as these were settled far away in the North at a place called Silthorpe, where they were solicitors of good standing, and with a large business. The Kingsworths were fair fresh-coloured people, with dark eyes and aquiline noses. They were slightly made and mostly of middle height, and were proud of their resemblance to the family type. James, the elder of those two brothers, was the handsomer, and George the more thoughtful looking of the two. He was writing a letter; while his brother, turning over the newspaper, looking out of window, and idly stirring the fire, seemed rather at a loss for some amusement.

"I declare, George," he said, presently, "I am lost in admiration of your good luck."

"Well," said George, good-humouredly, "if you think I am lucky I am the last person to deny it. I am – successful."

"That *you* should have succeeded in engaging yourself to an heiress! a lady, and a very handsome girl into the bargain. Why – if *I* could have done such a thing, *then* I should have won pardon for all my offences, retrieved my character for good sense, got my debts paid –"

"With the heiress's money?"

"No, no, don't you suppose my father would pay them twenty times over if I had done such a clever thing as to get engaged to Miss Lacy?"

"You don't seem to give my father much reason to think there is any use in paying them," said George, gravely.

James shrugged his shoulders, then said abruptly, "Where shall you live after your marriage?"

“I believe,” returned George, as he sealed his letter, “that my father, feeling the want of a mistress to his house, is very anxious that we should live here. Mary would be like a daughter to him.”

James’ brow darkened. “I don’t think I like that arrangement,” he said shortly. “I should find myself *de trop*.”

“Well, James,” said the younger brother, “I should think that you would find your visits at home much more comfortable if you were not tête-à-tête with my father.”

“Perhaps. But I thought I had heard something of a government appointment?”

“Yes,” said George, with some hesitation. “But my father needs some one to help him in all the business of the estate, and he offers me a sort of agency of it. Don’t be angry, Jem, I can assure you that your interests shall in no way suffer.”

“I suppose my father wouldn’t trust *me*.”

“Well – do you think he could?”

James Kingsworth started up at this unanswerable question, and walked over to the window. Alas, there was a long story of extravagance and disobedience, there had been evidence of fatal weakness of character, and of culpable indifference to the father’s wishes and feelings, before things had come to their present pass. Who could blame the father who had been so deeply disappointed in his elder son, if he turned for support to the younger one? who could blame George because he did not share in his brother’s well deserved disgrace?

James Kingsworth was ordinarily callous and indifferent to the pain his transgressions caused to others, nor would he ever confess to the suffering they must frequently have caused himself. Now, however, he was evidently hit hard, the step his father had taken showed him how entirely his respect was forfeited; and though the brothers had never been otherwise than friendly, there was a gleam of distrust in James’ eyes, which George felt to be unjustifiable. Had he not often smoothed over difficulties, and prevented useless explanations that could only lead to passionate scenes between the father and the son? For what a cruel disappointment this eldest born had been to the ambitious man who had shared so earnestly in *his* father’s desire to reinstate their family in their ancient honour and high place!

Nothing more passed between the brothers. They were cool-tempered people and rarely came to words. George was too fortunate, too sure of himself, and too happy in his bright prospects to waste anger on his brother, and James had that kind of nonchalance which is a very bad imitation of a forgiving nature.

He strolled out now into the March sunshine and looked about him. He was supposed to dislike Kingsworth, and annoyed his father frequently, by complaints of the cold wind, and the bleak downs, the old-fashioned house, and the general inferiority of the estate. Now he looked round at the chalky downs, the sparkling water, the pale blue sky, and wished, rather vaguely, perhaps, that his way lay clearer to the peaceful useful life proper to its owner. He had constantly refused to take any interest in the management of the estate, but none the better did he like that his brother should be in any sense the master of it.

Mr Kingsworth, however, was a man who pursued his own course, consulting nobody, and the arrangement was made. James was to receive his usual allowance, and George was to assist his father in the management of the estate.

“Provided,” Mr Kingsworth said punctiliously, “that the young lady whom he had chosen had no objection to make to the proposal.”

Mary Lacy was a tall, dark-eyed girl, graceful and distinguished, with a cultivated mind and strong enthusiastic temper.

George went to see her, and told her of the plan proposed. Their home, he said, “had been lonely since their mother’s death, and his father required both her presence within the house, and his assistance about the estate.”

Miss Lacy listened, thoughtfully. "You think we are so much wanted as to make this a duty?" she said.

"Don't you like the notion, Mary?" said George, surprised.

"I should like it very much," said Mary, with clear directness, "if you were the eldest and the heir. But as it is, I think I want you to make a career for yourself. But oh, George, I am ashamed of being so selfish and worldly-minded. Of course we must do it if your father wants us. And, don't you think, don't you think, George, that if Kingsworth was very bright and cheerful, it would be better for your brother too?"

"I am quite sure that every one will be the better for having you there, my dearest!"

"I will try, I will try my very best to have it so," said Mary, earnestly.

What better could she wish than to help her husband to sacrifice his natural desire for an independent career to his father's need? she would be wealthy, and her marriage settlements were to be handsome, there was no difficulty on that score, but she was ambitious enough to feel that the choice was a sacrifice, and enthusiastic enough to glory in being able to think of George as a hero, worthy of the good old Kingsworth name. So when the honeymoon was over, the bride came home, a young light-hearted creature, spite of her lofty carriage and shy manners, ready to love and respect her new relations, and with a specially kind thought, and as kind a look as her bashfulness permitted for James, who was to be helped to reform by his good brother, and reinstated in his father's favour.

James admired her very much. As he said, he could not have the luck to fix his affections on so undeniable an object. He had a very different ideal in his mind. What would his father say to the pretty penniless nursery governess, who had won his affections? He did not care what his father *said*, but he did care for what his father did, and a vague idea crossed his mind that his new sister-in-law might be a kind and generous ally.

She, on her side, felt that in setting these family disturbances right, she would find an object worthy of all her energies, and one only to be accomplished by herself living up to the strong Church principles and religious motives which, adopted perhaps as a matter of taste or education, were now to be tested by the trials of real life.

Chapter Two

The Reading of the Will

Mrs George Kingsworth had reigned for a year over Kingsworth House, her father-in-law had grown very fond of her, and the estate had prospered under George's management. But James scarcely ever came home, and was no nearer than before to his father's favour. Mr Kingsworth, though not old, was much broken in health, and it was not surprising that he should lean much on the son who was close at hand.

So mused the young wife as she sat in a little breakfast room in the second autumn after her marriage; her little four months old daughter on her knee. Her face had grown much graver and sterner since her wedding day, and she was only half attending to her lively cooing baby, as if her thoughts were not free to take pleasure in it.

"I don't think George need have shown that angry letter to his father," she thought, "what good could it do any one? I suppose such faults as James's do seem intolerable to a person like George. They *are* horrible." As these thoughts passed through her mind, her husband came into the room. He looked serious, said something about the weather, touched the baby's cheek with his finger, and at length observed, "Well, I am afraid poor James has done for himself at last!"

"How, what has happened?" said Mary, in alarm.

"They say a man is never ruined till he is married!"

"Married? Has he written to say so? Did you know anything about it?"

"He has not written, but my uncle has picked up a report, which he heard from Mr Hatton, that James has been married for some time. Of course if he had made a particularly creditable choice there would be no occasion for secrecy. We have heard less than usual of him lately."

"Do you know, can you guess at all who it is, George?"

"Well, I'm not sure, I think I can form a notion."

"Is it so very bad?"

"Quite a low connection, they say, not at all what my father would like, of course. But I can't undertake to answer for James, I don't *know* anything about it."

"What shall you do? Oh, George, don't you think it might be made a turning point? If James would write to your father and tell him all."

"I shall write and advise him to make a clean breast of it; but he has offended my father over and over again: and at last, people must take the consequences of their actions."

Mrs George heard nothing more of the correspondence that ensued, she was not in the habit of hearing much of the family affairs; and being clever, and with strong clear opinions as to what was right and good, she would have liked to receive a little more confidence, and to have known the meaning of the lawyer's visits which just at that time were frequent. She could not forget these matters in the fact that her little Katharine had cut two teeth, or leave them in utter trust to her husband's judgment.

Whatever playful companionship or constant caresses the baby missed in her mother, was supplied by a young nursemaid named Alice Taylor, a merry, laughing, black-eyed girl, who was devoted to the baby, and so thought well of by her mistress, but who was not approved of by the other servants, among whom she had made no secret of her preference for the lively complimentary Mr James over the very grave and silent young master now in command.

The old housekeeper put forth a hint that Alice was "flighty," and her mistress was meditating a little improving conversation, when this as well as all other considerations were put out of her mind by the dangerous illness of her father-in-law.

The illness was very sudden and very short, and before his son and his brother could reach Kingsworth all was over. This brother was a clergyman of some reputation, and had recently been appointed to a canonry of Fanchester, the cathedral town of the county in which Kingsworth was situated. His presence was a great comfort and help, especially to Mrs Kingsworth, who was very fond of him. James did not arrive till the day before the funeral; the letter had followed him abroad, he said, and had been delayed. He was shocked and subdued, and George was very busy, so that there was not much opportunity of conversation between them; but late in the evening as Mary was sitting in the drawing-room by herself, James came in and said with hesitation, "Mary, you have always been a very kind sister to me: I wonder if you will be equally kind to – my wife?"

"Oh, James, I hope so!" she said, with sudden colour. "But won't you tell me something about her?"

"Hasn't George told you? Didn't you know I was married?" he said quickly.

"Yes, but –"

Poor Mrs Kingsworth stammered and hesitated, but James went on in a half joking tone which yet had an under current of appeal in it.

"I don't see why my father should object. I assure you it's a chance for me! But ah, I forgot. Was he very violent, Mary, when he understood all about it?"

"I don't know, George did not tell me. I should like to hear all about her."

"I have written to George. Of course it's not a good match, but she is very respectably connected. Her mother keeps a school and she was a governess. I knew nothing that I did would be well received at home, and so I said nothing about my marriage."

"What is her name?" asked Mary.

"Ellen; her name was Ellen Bury. But you know, Mary, it's much too late to make a fuss about it all, because I was married soon after you were, and my baby is nearly as old as yours."

"Oh, James, how could you keep the secret for such a long time?"

"Well, there seemed no favourable opportunity, and I thought if the child had been a boy I would have spoken then. Besides I think George must have guessed about it. He had heard of Ellen before."

"It is a little girl then?"

"Yes; Emberance, a family name, you know. She's a very jolly little thing. One puts off things, no doubt it was wrong. I wish I *had* told my poor father myself. But now you see, Mary, when my wife comes here it will make all the difference to her to have a friend in the family. I don't want anything to be said till after to-morrow, but I thought I would talk to you."

"I am sorry you kept it secret," she said, "that was not fair on your wife. But I will always be friendly to her. I think she ought to come here, and that everything should be explained as soon as possible."

"Yes, but don't say anything to George, to-night. I want to talk it all over with him myself. Here's my uncle!" Mrs Kingsworth was a good deal impressed with the softening of James' tone and manner. She pitied him greatly for not having been able to receive his father's forgiveness; and never having expected a very elevated line of conduct from him, she was less shocked at the concealment than might have been supposed.

In her own mind she passed a resolution that however uncongenial James' wife might prove to her, she would always give her her due, and act towards her with kindness and consideration.

Some thoughts she gave to the fact that Kingsworth was her home no longer; but they were hardly thoughts of regret, she had never loved it, and she felt glad that she and her husband were free now to form a home for themselves. There would be no lack of means, she knew that George would not be left unprovided for by his father, and she herself was rich. She would not say even to herself how her heart leapt at the thought of freedom from the toils, tangles, and temptations of Kingsworth.

The funeral took place early in the day, quietly, for the Kingsworths were not people given to much display. The weather was dark and dreary, a thick sea-mist blotting everything out of sight, and adding to the mournfulness of the occasion.

When they came back from church, Mrs Kingsworth ran hastily up to the nursery to find some cheering in the sight of her child. She opened the door on a scene that she little expected. Instead of decorous silence, or subdued comments, a confusion of angry voices met her ear, and the head nurse, a very grand personage, of whose experience her mistress herself stood somewhat in awe, turned round at her entrance.

“Indeed, ma’am, you will be surprised and grieved at what you see. It is disgraceful at such a time as this. Nor should I have spoken till to-morrow, if you hadn’t happened to open the door.”

“But what is it? what is the matter?” said Mrs Kingsworth, perceiving the pretty Alice sobbing and protesting, while two or three other servants were standing round.

“Your earrings, ma’am, that were missing the other day. When I came back not five minutes ago, I found Alice looking in her workbox, she dropped it when I opened the door, and out rolled the earrings on the floor. It’s not the first time I’ve suspected her.”

“I never touched the earrings,” sobbed Alice, “never. I believe she put ’em in my box herself! she’s always been against me.”

“Alice!” said her mistress, “that is not the way to speak. It is impossible to inquire into the matter now. It must wait till to-morrow.”

“I won’t stay here to be suspected, I’ll go away this moment,” said Alice.

“That’s not for you to choose,” said the nurse. “Suppose my mistress sends for the police.”

“No, no,” said Mrs Kingsworth, “not that. But I am grieved that you should attempt to deny what seems so plain a fact. I will pay you your wages and you had better go at once. It is not fitting to have a discussion now. I will come and see you.”

Perhaps Mrs Kingsworth hardly knew how stern her sad face and voice sounded. In truth, though she had forgotten her earrings in the shock of her father-in-law’s illness, she had been much perplexed at their loss, and various circumstances had seemed to point suspicion at Alice.

The scene ended by such an outburst of violent and unrestrained passion from the girl, as prejudiced every one still further against her, and Mrs Kingsworth withdrew with her sobs and declarations that she would make them all suffer for falsely accusing her, still ringing in her ears. Mrs Kingsworth went down into the library, and before she left the room she had forgotten Alice and the earrings as completely as if they had never existed: for she heard her father-in-law’s will read, and in the reading of that will the whole face of life was changed to her.

Neither brother looked at ease as they prepared to listen. James was oppressed with the weight of his secret, and perhaps with the sense of his many sins against his father. George changed colour and manifestly listened with eagerness.

The will was accompanied by a statement written in Mr Kingsworth’s own hand. After speaking of his father’s purchase of the old house, and of his own pride in coming into possession of it, and his desire to reestablish the family fortunes, there was a very stern and unsoftened repetition of all James’ misdemeanours, and of their frequent forgiveness, of the sums of money that had been paid for him, and of how they had impoverished the estate. He had long known that the object of himself and his father would be undone by his son, had long hesitated as to the disposition of his property, but now understanding, that in addition to all these causes of displeasure James had contracted secretly a marriage of a discreditable kind, he must take the consequences of his actions, and see his father’s estate left to one who in every way deserved it.

Accordingly the will, executed only a fortnight before Mr Kingsworth’s death, left his whole property to his second son, and disinherited James altogether.

There was a moment’s blank silence, then James started up.

“But my letter – my letter that I wrote to you, George? I sent you a full explanation to lay before my father. Where is it? Why did he not receive it?”

“I did not find an opportunity,” said George slowly. “While he was unfavourably disposed, it would have been useless.”

“You did not find – you did not make one,” cried James passionately; “I deserved something of this, but my father never would have acted with such cruelty, had he read that letter. You told me it was better to make *you* the channel of approach – besides, you must have known – you could have guessed at first the rights of the story.”

“It is natural that you should be angry – ” began George.

“Natural! yes indeed! Did you not tell me that you endeavoured to soften my father’s anger. Didn’t you promise that he should know the efforts I was making?”

“Hush, James!” interposed the Canon; “you must allow George to speak. This thing is done and cannot be undone, for there is no question either of my brother’s ability or of his right to make his will, when this statement was written.”

There was a moment’s pause, then George said, “I have nothing to say. It is impossible to reply to my brother’s insinuations.”

“You had better produce James’ letter now,” said the Canon, “that there may be no further misunderstanding.”

“I – I was about to say,” said George, “that most unfortunately, the letter is mislaid; otherwise I might have found an opportunity – Mary, you do not recollect seeing such a letter?”

“No, George, you never showed it to me, nor told me you had received it,” she said, in a hard clear voice that startled them all.

“I think,” said the Canon, with decision, “that we had better separate; no good can be attained by further discussion now. If you will come with me, James, I shall be glad to hear all the particulars of your marriage.”

James had not perhaps so fully realised the situation as to feel the full force of his anger against his brother. He followed his uncle, and the family solicitor, who had been present at the reading of the will, took leave, saying that he should call again on the next day, when matters were more ripe for discussion.

The door closed behind him, and the husband and wife were left alone.

She had remained in her seat by the fire, silent except when appealed to, through the whole interview. Now she sprang up and ran to him, laying her hands on his, and looking right into his eyes, with a passionate appeal in her own.

“George, we can give it back to him,” she said, breathlessly.

“My dear Mary,” said George, turning his head away, “don’t be so unreasonable: James has forfeited it over and over again. This is better for him and for all of us.”

“But the letter – ”

“Surely, Mary, you do not mean to join with those who insult me by such a suspicion,” cried George, angrily.

She looked right into his face, then turned away and burst into an agony of weeping, and George, anxious to think the matter well over, left her alone to recover herself.

Chapter Three

Found Drowned

Mrs Kingsworth remained near the library fire by herself. Her tears soon ceased, and she sat still and silent, in the grasp of a conviction from which she could not free herself. Every word that George had said might be true, and yet she knew, she felt that all his wishes had worked in his own favour, that a “covetous desire” had been granted perhaps even in spite of weak and inadequate words and actions telling the other way. An intense feeling of shame seized on her. What in all the world, she thought, was worth the loss of self-respect? She heard, without heeding, loud and angry voices, and the sudden shutting of the front door; but she never moved till Canon Kingsworth came into the room.

“Well,” he said, “James has told me the whole story. It was very foolish, he had no right to marry in the relations in which he stood towards his father; but the whole thing has been much misrepresented. I take blame to myself for my hasty account of it.”

“It ought to be set right,” said Mrs Kingsworth, steadily.

“Set right? do you mean reverse the will? Ah, my dear, that is impossible: but I think that though my brother might in any case have made the same will in the main, had he known the facts, he would not have left James penniless.”

“He would not have made any new will at all, but for that false report,” said Mrs Kingsworth. Her tone was so marked and so miserable that Canon Kingsworth turned away from the subject at once.

“I shall take an opportunity of talking to George,” he said, “to-morrow, when our minds are quieter. I am very anxious to avoid further discussion to-night. James is very angry, and I am afraid unforgettable words passed as he went out.”

“Has he gone out?”

“Yes; I think George did so too, afterwards.”

Mrs Kingsworth sat on by the fire, she felt no impulse to move, to talk the matter over, or to try to gain any new lights upon it. She was absolutely silent; while the Canon took up a book from the table, and read, or feigned to read it, till the butler looked in and said, “Will the gentlemen be in to dinner, ma’am?”

“To dinner? Is it dinner-time? Are they still out? Oh yes, we will wait for them.”

They waited, till the Canon grew impatient, and went to look out of the window.

“Why, there is a dense fog,” he said, “what can induce either of them to stay out in it?”

Mrs Kingsworth roused herself with a start. “It is close upon eight o’clock,” she said, “what can keep them?”

“The fog is thick enough to make them lose their way. I’ll have the dinner bell rung outside the door.”

They hardly knew how impatience gradually melted into uneasiness, and uneasiness into alarm; but before the next two hours were over, every man-servant in the place was shouting and searching, ringing the great bell in every direction, losing themselves and each other in the blinding mist, and with one conviction growing stronger every moment in their minds.

“The cliffs!” That whisper was in every one’s mind long before it found its way to their lips; but the first sound of it terrified Mrs Kingsworth almost out of her senses. She had been very slow to take alarm; but her fears once excited, all hope was gone from her. As for the Canon, he instituted every possible search and said nothing; but his mind was filled with terrible possibilities, which he would not put into words.

The night passed in perplexity and alarm, and even the dawn brought no relief; for the heavy sea-fog still hung thick over the cliffs and the shore; till, suddenly, as it seemed almost in a moment, it rolled back and left the white cliffs and the glittering waves bright in the morning sun.

The tide was low, and on the beach beneath the cliffs were found the bodies of James and George Kingsworth, clasped in each other's arms as if each had tried to rescue the other, or – But there was nothing to justify any other interpretation.

From the moment when James' passionate words to his brother as he hurried out of the house had been dimly overheard in the hall, till the bodies were found on the beach, nothing was known of him. George had gone out a few minutes later, with a cigar, quietly and by himself.

They had gone out into the mist and darkness, and mist and darkness hung impenetrably over their memories.

Among all the painful duties that devolved upon Canon Kingsworth that of disclosing what had passed to James' wife weighed on him by far the most heavily.

It was due to her that the family should now recognise her claims. She had, according to James' story, been living at Dinan, and there the Canon went to fetch her, leaving the other poor young widow in a strange state of silent stunned grief. As soon as might be he returned, bringing Mrs James Kingsworth and her baby with him. She was a pretty young woman, and her reception of him before she knew the sad news he had come to tell had impressed him favourably; but now she was in a state of anger and half-realised grief, speaking of James as if he had been in all respects perfection in her eyes, and only now and then rousing herself from her distress, to remember that her child was disinherited. Canon Kingsworth was very glad to see her safely in her room and under charge of the housekeeper, and as he turned into the library to consider the situation, his other niece stood before him, with a letter in her hand.

"Uncle, I have found it. Here is James' letter. I found it in the writing-case George always used. Now there is but one thing to be done. My baby shall not profit by this injustice. Let James' child take it all. It is not Katharine's."

"Hush, you do not know what you are saying. Let me look at the letter."

He glanced it over, and said gravely, "Yes, it concurs in all respects with what James told me. Mary, it is impossible now to judge. The past must be laid to rest. The will is valid, and secures this property to your child. Nothing that you can do can alter it. Some provision it is no doubt necessary should be made for James' daughter out of the estate, and I need not ask you to show kindness to one as bitterly afflicted as yourself."

"It is a burden that I cannot bear," she said, passionately. "How can Katharine prosper under it! At least there must be full confession."

"Stop, Mary, what is it that you want to confess? Remember you *know* nothing."

"I know that Mr Kingsworth did not get that letter. I know that my child has her cousin's right. If he – if George had no *time* to do justice, I must do it for him."

"Recognise and receive her kindly, that is the first thing to do."

That was a strange interview between the two young widows, widowed so suddenly and so recently, that neither bore any token in her dress of her condition – both suffering under the same loss; both with the same comfort left to them.

Mary approached with reverence for her sister-in-law's grief, with a sense, keen in her soul, of standing in her place – but the other was shy and hard; till the mention of her husband's name broke down her reserve, and she sobbed out her misery at his loss, in such evident ignorance of his character and himself, that any attempt to explain the state of the case, any apology offered, only seemed an additional injury. Mary made her statement, notwithstanding all the tears with which it was met.

"This letter was not given to our father-in-law. He never knew the truth about your marriage. I can but ask you to forgive," she said, with a bitter proud humility. "I am afraid that your husband's errors were not put in the best light before his father."

“My husband’s errors! How dare any one say he had errors! If he had, I will never hear a whisper of them *now*! now that I have lost him,” sobbed Ellen Kingsworth, while Mary stood silenced by a view of wifely duty so unlike her own.

Ellen turned away from her with manifest suspicion and dislike, and Mary having relieved her conscience was too much absorbed in her own shame and dread – in the terrible fear of she knew not what, to show sufficient tenderness to overcome the repulsion.

In a day or two, however, Mrs James Kingsworth’s mother, Mrs Bury, arrived on the scene: a gentle ladylike woman, who had worked hard at school-keeping for her living, and who avowed that her daughter’s secret marriage had been made without her knowledge, and afterwards concealed greatly against her will.

She expressed much less surprise than Ellen had done at the disinheritance of her son-in-law, of whom she evidently had formed no good opinion, refused at first with some quiet pride the offers of assistance for Emberance’s education, saying that she and her daughter were far from being unable to support her; but perceiving how earnestly and sincerely the Kingsworths wished to make this arrangement, she replied that it was an acknowledgment of her daughter’s position, and as such she accepted the allowance offered – a small one – for the affairs of Kingsworth had been much hampered by James’ debts. Katharine Kingsworth must owe to her long minority, or to her mother’s wealth, the means of supporting her inheritance.

These matters settled, and the sad double funeral over, Mrs James Kingsworth and her mother and child went away from Kingsworth, doubtless with much sense of injury and disappointment; while Mary was left, feeling as if a burden had been laid upon her, that would crush the brightness out of her life for ever – the brightness, not the energy nor the resolution. She looked forward through the years, and set one aim before her – to undo the injustice which she believed her husband to have done, and to free her child from her unlawful possessions.

How she succeeded, the sequel will tell.

Chapter Four

Applehurst

Down in a valley from which the softly outlined, richly wooded hills sloped away on every side, shut out by copse and orchard from church and village, lay an old red-brick house. High walls closed in its gardens, and within and without them the fruit trees bloomed and bore as the seasons came round. The ruddy moss-grown walls and the house itself shone white and radiant with spring blossoms, or supported the richly coloured freight of autumn fruit, while the copse woods and the orchards surged away over the hills, and never a roof or spire broke their solitude. The very road that led to the iron gate, so rarely opened, was noiseless and grass-grown; the soft moss gathered on the garden-paths, spite of their trim keeping; in the high summer, even the birds were silent. Year by year the same flowers either grew up or were planted in the quaintly cut beds; year by year the fruit dropped on the ground, and was picked up lest it should be an eyesore, not because any one wanted it for profit or for pleasure. Never elsewhere did the trees bend beneath such a weight of fruitage, surely no other roses and clematis flowered so profusely, no other turf was so soft and green, as if no strange foot ever trod it, no rough hand ever came near to pluck the brilliant blossoms. The scream of a railway whistle, even the roll of a carriage hardly ever disturbed the silence; the stock-doves cooed, and the starlings cried unstartled by any passing footsteps. The gardeners, moving deliberately to and fro, seemed too leisurable to disturb the feeling of quiet.

Suddenly, between the hanging creepers, a side door opened, and a girl darted hastily out, ran across the soft turf, and began to pace up and down the broad walks beneath the sunny fruit-laden walls, with rapid impatient steps.

She spoilt the picture. This was no dreamy maiden, idle and peaceful, to complete the charm of the garden scene; but a creature impatient and incongruous, evidently suffering under an access of temper or of trouble, probably of both, for she snatched off a twig as she passed and pulled it in pieces, and her bright hazel eyes were full of angry tears.

She was small and rather short, with the sort of birdlike air, always given by a delicately hooked nose, and round dark eyes set rather close together. Her hair of a reddish chestnut was crisp and rough, her skin brilliantly fair and rosy, and her teeth white, and just perceptible beneath the short upper lip. A pretty healthy face, but fierce, restless, and haughty.

"Oh, how I hate it! I wish – I wish – There it is, I don't know what to wish for – except an earthquake that would knock the place to bits. I will not bear it a day longer –"

"Miss Kitty, here are some nice ripe peaches, should you like to eat a few," said the old gardener, approaching her, "or a Jargonelle pear?"

"I'm tired of pears and peaches!" said the girl ungraciously; "what is the good of so much fruit?"

"There's some lavender ready to cut, Miss Katharine, then, – young ladies like to be doing something."

"I'll tell you what I'll do then, Dickson," said Katharine, "just leave that ladder against the wall, and I'll climb up and look *over*, – perhaps I could see the church spire, or a waggon, – or a new cow. That would be something."

"La! missy, – young ladies shouldn't climb ladders!"

"You never were a young lady, Dickson," said Katharine, laughing, while her foot still twitched impatiently.

"La! no, Miss Katharine, that I never was, – I've been man and boy this seventy year."

"Then you don't know how much nicer it is to be anything else!" said Katharine. "But the peaches *are* nice, thank you," she added, taking one, "though this place is to life, what peaches are to roast mutton – cloying."

She laughed again as she spoke, subsiding into the ordinary discontent of a well accustomed grievance. For it was no new thing for Katharine Kingsworth to wish herself anywhere but at Applehurst. Had she known how good a right she had to another home and to other interests, she might have been still less willing to endure her seclusion. But though she did not know her own family history, the sad fact that had prompted her mother, while still a young woman, to bury herself and her child at Applehurst was well-known to several people.

When that stern resolution had come to the new made widow, as she looked round on Kingsworth, and thought of the terrible doubt in which her husband's fate was involved, thought of the way in which the country round must regard her daughter's inheritance, a great horror of the place weighed on her. The Canon and Mr Macclesfield, the family man of business, might manage the estate as they liked, – she would never live there, never go there, and Katharine should not grow up where every one looked askance at her.

It was a vehement, one-sided resolution, and Canon Kingsworth did not approve of it; but as, of course, Katharine's minority had never been contemplated, the will named no personal guardians for her, and he could not, if he would, have taken her from her mother's charge. Applehurst belonged to Mrs Kingsworth herself, and thither she betook herself with her year-old baby, and there, with one short interval, she had remained ever since. Katharine was now a woman, and even her mother began to feel that something more was due to her.

Mrs Kingsworth was a woman of very strong principles and perhaps not very tender feelings. She was clever, high-spirited, and very handsome, when as Mary Lacy she had married George Kingsworth, and had he been worthy of her, might have softened into an excellent woman. But when she discovered his falsity, neither her love nor his terrible death threw any softening veil over her disappointment. She shuddered at her own disgrace yet more than at his, and every association connected with him was hateful to her. She was really perfectly unworldly, and she did not care at all for the wealth and position that had tempted him.

She took Katharine away, determined to rear her up in high, stern principles, and never to allow her to become accustomed to the life of an heiress. Let her be happy and know that she could be happy without Kingsworth, and on the day she was twenty-one let her give it back to her cousin Emberance.

This was the clue to Mrs Kingsworth's conduct, this was the hope, nay, the resolve of her life, and therefore she brought up Katharine to be independent of luxuries and of society, therefore she secluded her from all intercourse with those of her own rank, fearing lest any marriage engagement might tie her hands, or any preference warp her judgment, before the day when she could legally free herself from the weight of her wealth.

Mrs Kingsworth, like many another parent, did not calculate on the unknown factors in the problem, – the will and the character of her own child.

Katharine grew up a merry, healthy child, sufficiently intelligent, but without the love of books, which her mother had hoped to see, with all natural instincts strong in her, and with an ardent desire to have other little girls to play with.

“Mamma, tell me how you used to go and drink tea with your cousins,” – “Mamma, do ask a little girl to come and stay here,” – “Mamma, I should like to go to Mrs Leicester's school,” were among her earliest aspirations.

Her mother was clever and well-informed enough to educate her well, but solitary study was uninteresting to so sociable a being, and the girl was devoid of the daydreaming faculty, which while it would have given form to her desires, might have whiled away many a dreary hour. As it was, the poor child jarred her mother with every taste and turn that she developed.

High-mindedness was to be cultivated by a careful and sparing selection of poetry and romance; but this provoking Katharine at twelve years old borrowed the kitchen-maids Sunday-school prizes, and preferred them to the “Lady of the Lake.”

She thought her mother's heroes tiresome, and with that curious instinctive resistance of strong-willed childhood to any set purpose of influence, could not be induced to care for the glorious tales of self-sacrifice and noble poverty which still made her mother's blood thrill and her eyes brighten.

She was very carefully instructed in religious matters, and duly every Sunday attended service at Applehurst, a tiny country church with a very old-fashioned childless vicar, and one very quiet Sunday service. When Katharine was sixteen, the one event of her life took place, and her mother took her for three days to Fanchester, the cathedral city, where Canon Kingsworth lived, to be confirmed.

The vicar had nominally prepared her, her mother had endeavoured earnestly to influence her. Surely the first sight of the glorious cathedral, the solemn service, would awaken in the girl that tone of mind in which she now seemed so deficient.

But to Katharine the railway journey, the town, the people were a dream, or rather, a reality of delight.

"We will take Katharine over the cathedral to-day, that it may not be quite strange to her to-morrow," said the Canon's wife on the first morning.

"Oh please – please – but I shall see that to-morrow. Oh, Aunt Kingsworth, let me go and buy something in a shop. Let me see the streets first!"

And though she was obedient and decorous, it was evident that she could not think or feel in such a world of enchanting novelty. She could only look and enjoy.

After the Confirmation was over, her uncle delayed a few minutes and presently came in, bringing with him across the narrow close one of the white-veiled girls, who had just been confirmed.

"Mary," he said briefly, "this is Emberance Kingsworth. Katharine, this is your cousin."

"Oh, have I got a cousin?" cried Katharine vehemently, as she rushed at Emberance and reached up to kiss her. For Emberance was a tall, slim creature, with large soft eyes and a blushing face.

She looked with a certain shrinking at the new relations, though she returned the kiss.

"Miss Kingsworth is pleased to find a new cousin," said a lady who was present.

"Miss *Katharine*," said her mother, turning round on the speaker, "my niece is Miss Kingsworth if you please."

The interview was not allowed to last long, and Emberance was sent back to join her schoolfellows, but Katharine never forgot it, – nor indeed her visit to Fanchester.

She knew what she wanted now, and chafed when she did not get it. And month by month and year by year she and her mother grew further apart, and only Katharine's childish, undeveloped nature kept her feelings within bounds.

Chapter Five

Speculations

That hot autumn day was destined, little as she knew it, to be a crisis in Katharine Kingsworth's life. She was very far from expecting that anything should happen to her, as she sauntered along by the garden wall, eating her peaches, and wondering what to do when she had finished them. She was accustomed to have her time pretty well filled up with her studies; but the absence of object and of emulation had made these of late very wearisome to her, and her mother had half unconsciously relaxed the rein, having indeed nearly come to the end of her own powers. Carefully as she learned and taught, the want of contact with other minds deprived her own of its freshness. Katharine at nineteen was sick of reading history and doing sums, and of talking French one day and German the next. She did not like drawing, and her musical taste was of a commonplace kind, and could not flourish "itself its own delight."

She loved her mother; but she was afraid of her, and conscious of failing to satisfy her, and the impatient desire of Change hid from her all the pleasure of association and long habit.

"I wonder if mamma means this to go on for ever," she thought. "Am I to live here till I am as old as she is? Surely other girls have more variety. I don't know much about it – but I begin to think our lives are odd as well as disagreeable. Surely we *could* go again and see Uncle Kingsworth – or go and stay somewhere else? We *could* – why don't we? Are we rich, I wonder?"

The childishness of a mind which had never had anything to measure itself with, and the unvarying ascendancy of a most resolute will, had so acted that Katharine had never distinctly put these questions to herself before. Often as she had murmured, she had never resisted, nor realised the possibility of resistance. Often as she had declared that her life was hateful to her, she had no more expected that it would change than that the sun would come out because she complained when it was raining.

Katharine was impetuous; but if she had any of her mother's strength of purpose it was as yet undeveloped. Yet all sorts of impulses and desires were awakening within her, and gradually driving her to a settled purpose – namely, to question her mother as to her reasons for living at Applehurst, and her intentions for the future.

It would be difficult to realise how tremendous a step this seemed to Katharine. To have an opinion of her own and grumble about it, was one thing – to act upon it, quite another – still she got up from her knees by the lavender bush, which she had been cutting while indulging in these meditations, and walked slowly into the house. Katharine never remembered coming into her mother's presence in her life without a certain sense of awe and of expectation of criticism, and now as she opened the drawing-room door, her heart beat fast, and her colour, always bright enough, burnt all over her forehead and neck.

It was a pretty pleasant drawing-room; with an unmistakable air of refinement and cultivation; plenty of books and tokens of occupation, while all the furniture was handsome and in good order.

Mrs Kingsworth was sitting at a davenport, writing a letter. She was a tall woman, with a figure slender and *élancé* as that of a girl, delicate, regular features, and a small head adorned with an abundance of smooth, dark hair. Spite of her quiet black dress and cap, she had lost little of her youthfulness, and her eyes were bright, keen, and full of life. Otherwise it was a still set face, with little variety of expression, and spite of some likeness of form and colouring most unlike in character to the changing flushing countenance of the girl beside her.

"Isn't it time you found some occupation, Katharine?" she said.

There was no displeasure in her tone, but as Katharine stood silent, she said quietly, "Go and practise for an hour, I don't like to see you doing nothing."

“What *can* it matter what I do?” said Katharine impetuously, her quickly roused temper diverting her in a moment from her purpose.

“Only as rational occupation is rather a better thing than idleness,” said Mrs Kingsworth with a touch of satire in her voice.

“I mean – Mamma, I want to know whether we are to live at Applehurst for ever and ever?” cried Katharine, suddenly and without any warning.

“What makes you ask me such a question?” said her mother quickly.

“Because I want an answer to it, mother! because I – I want to go away. I want to know why we never have any change. I should like to go to the sea-side – to have some friends. I hate Applehurst!”

Katharine was so frightened that there were tears in her voice as she spoke. She stood behind her mother’s chair, and twitched her hands together nervously. Mrs Kingsworth looked down at her letter.

“I thought, Katie,” she said, “that I had taught you to look for better things than change and amusement. It would grieve me very much if you had a turn for constant excitement. That is a kind of character which I despise.”

“I think it is very dull here,” said Katharine; “I want to know people. I want to do something different.”

She was fairly crying by this time, and after a minute’s silence her mother went on speaking.

“Do you know, Katharine, what I consider to be more worth living for than anything else?”

“What?” said Katharine surprised.

“The opportunity of doing a noble action,” said Mrs Kingsworth, in a low tone; “so to live and so to think and believe that if a great choice came to one, one would do the right thing, let the consequences be what they might.”

She laid down her pen that her daughter might not see her hand tremble. It was quite as critical a moment to her as to Katharine.

“Yes, but I don’t see what all that has to do with our being shut up in Applehurst!”

“Perhaps not – but you can recognise the principle that life has better aims than amusement. Believe me, no good is worth having which is bought at the expense of the slightest self-reproach.”

“I don’t mean to be cross, mamma,” said Katharine, entirely mistaking her drift, “but if we could go away sometimes – you know I *am* grown up.”

“Are you?” said Mrs Kingsworth. “Sometimes you are so childish that I can hardly believe it. If I could see that you had more fixed principle, that you really cared for your duty, I might think it more possible to expose you to temptations of which you now know nothing.”

“But, mamma, I don’t want to do anything wrong.”

“I think you do not see the beauty of caring for the highest right.”

Katharine pouted. She was too well trained to be flippant; but her mother’s tone irritated her; so that contrary to the principle in which she had been trained that nothing was ever gained by crying for it, she burst into tears. Mrs Kingsworth looked round at her as she stood sobbing in a vehement girlish fashion, and rubbing her eyes with her pocket-handkerchief.

“Well,” she said, “you will have a little change. Uncle Kingsworth has written to propose a visit, and I am telling him that we shall expect him here on Monday. If you like,” she added after a pause, “you can tell him your troubles.”

“He might ask us to go again to stay with him,” said Katharine, brightening up.

Her mother made no answer, and the girl slipped away into the garden and sat down on the grass. She felt ruffled and vexed, with an impression that her mother was very unsympathising, and that the sentiments which she had uttered were tiresome, matter-of-course truisms, not worth enforcing. But Uncle Kingsworth was coming, and that was something to look forward to. And before many minutes had passed Mrs Kingsworth heard Katharine run up stairs, humming a tune.

She sat still herself, oppressed with a sense of failure. How could she ever rely on this impatient childish girl to carry out the act of restitution on which her heart was set?

“If she fails I should despise her!” said Mrs Kingsworth to herself with slower tears than Katharine’s rising in her eyes, “yet I suppose her wishes are natural.”

She loved her daughter as much as ever daughter was loved; but she cared infinitely more that Katharine should be good than that she should be happy, and this principle carried out logically in small matters made her the very opposite of a spoiling mother.

Still she was enough disturbed by what had passed to resolve almost for the first time in her life on consulting Canon Kingsworth. Her clear high purpose had crystallised itself in her mind, and had been sufficient for itself – every other influence had been a disturbance from it.

Canon Kingsworth’s rare visits were always a pleasant excitement at Applehurst. The later dinner, the different dress, the turning out of the spare bedroom gave an unwonted feeling of “company” in itself cheerful. Not that there was ever anything to complain of in the household; for though Mrs Kingsworth was not a woman who found pleasure in domestic details, she was accustomed as a matter of course to have everything kept up to a certain mark of propriety and comfort.

But the sound of a man’s voice in the house, the conversation on general topics, the bright sense of outside life was enchanting to Katharine. The Canon was a fine old gentleman – still in full vigour, with abundant white hair and eyes and features of a type which his great-niece inherited. He had a certain respect for her mother and great pity, though not much liking; while she, vigorous and independent as she was, could not help a certain leaning to the only person who still called her “Mary.”

Conversation was general on the evening of the Canon’s arrival, and he took much pains to cultivate Katharine and to draw her out. On former occasions she had been full of eager talk of her lessons or her pets, or of inquiries for things and people seen in her never-to-be-forgotten visit to Fanchester; but to-day she was quiet and demure, so that the next morning after breakfast when she went to practise and Canon Kingsworth was left alone with her mother, he said, —

“Katharine is a very pretty girl; but she wants manner.”

“I am uneasy about Katharine. I do not know how to act for the best,” said Mrs Kingsworth abruptly.

“I suppose she begins to desire a little society,” said the Canon.

“Yes, almost to demand it.”

“Well, Mary, you know what I have always thought, that with the best intentions you did Katharine injustice in keeping her in ignorance of her true position.”

“Her *true* position!” said Mrs Kingsworth under her breath.

“Yes, however obtained, she is the owner of Kingsworth, and in two years’ time her duty will be to do her best for the welfare of the place and the people.”

“Do you not really know, Uncle Kingsworth, what my one aim has been in educating Katharine?” said Mrs Kingsworth, looking up steadily at him.

“I have always supposed that you have educated her in the way which you conscientiously think the best; though as you know, I have not always agreed with your view.”

“I shall tell you the whole truth,” said Mrs Kingsworth with sudden resolution. “I cannot conceive that any one can take another view of the matter. You know that I believe – that I am sure this property was obtained by an act of the greatest possible injustice. An act of meanness! I am bound to say the truth, whoever was the actor.”

“Indeed, Mary, I think those sad suspicions are far better laid to sleep,” said the Canon gravely.

“I do not agree with you,” said Mrs Kingsworth. “The only reparation is to undo the wrong. Katharine and I cannot have masses said for my husband’s soul; but we can refuse to profit by the sin that he committed. We need not share it. I wish Katharine on the day she comes of age to give up the estate to the rightful heiress, her cousin Emberance. I have tried to show her in all my training the beauty of self-sacrifice, to make the right thing so good in her eyes that she should be ready to prefer it to selfish pleasure. I never meet with a response! I cannot trust in her carrying out my purpose.”

Mrs Kingsworth's voice had faltered as she went on, and now broke down completely; while the eyes, which she had raised with a certain childlike directness, filled with tears.

Canon Kingsworth took two turns up and down the room before he answered her, and then said slowly and deliberately, —

“I do not consider that Katharine is called upon to make such a renunciation.”

“Not legally, I know,” said Mrs Kingsworth.

“Nor, I think, on any principle. Let us be plain with each other. You think that but for George's reticence the property would have gone to James. There is no doubt that had my brother been aware that his sons would only leave a girl apiece, he would have left the bulk of it to Walter Kingsworth, his cousin. I think that had he known all the circumstances of James' marriage, he would not have wholly disinherited him; but I think that enough had passed to prevent him from making an eldest son of him. Indeed the place would have been ruined if he had. James deserved his punishment. Moreover, Mary, no living man will ever know what lies between their memories.”

“James' deserts do not affect the question. Better give up all than retain part, even unfairly. My husband deceived his father, his daughter shall not enjoy the reward of that deception.”

“But the scandal, the publicity — ”

“I do not care for the scandal. The real shame lies in the fact, not in the knowledge of it. Let every one know the part my husband played; sin *must* bring shame. They will know too that his daughter has no part in the matter.”

“And how could James' memory come out?”

“I do not care to clear James' memory, but my own hands and Katharine's. I do not care what becomes of Kingsworth. Let it go to ruin, — what is that to me?”

“It certainly ought to be something to Katharine, — a Kingsworth herself,” said the Canon, somewhat affronted.

“So,” pursued Mrs Kingsworth, unheeding, “I thought she should have a ready-made life independent of Kingsworth, that her affections should not cling to it. When her hands are free, *then* I should wish her to have the chance of marrying like other girls, though I hope she will remain single.”

“You would be very much blamed, Mary, if you did not give the child an opportunity of judging for herself.”

“Well, — possibly. You think I ought to take her to Kingsworth now?”

“Yes, and I entreat you to avoid influencing her decision.”

“Well, I promise to leave her to work it out for herself.”

“That is right, Mary. And at any rate show her something of the ordinary life and interests of young ladies. I allow that the circumstances are very unusual, and I think she does owe much consideration towards Embrace. Ask her to stay with you at Kingsworth, she is a charming girl.”

“I have no wish to know anything of Embrace,” said Mrs Kingsworth, hastily, “it is not for her sake I act, but, — well, if you think it might incline Katharine to what I wish.”

“I think the two cousins ought to know each other. Now the question is how far Kate should be told of past events. I should say as little as possible.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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