EDMUND YATES

BLACK SHEEP

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A Novel

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CHAPTER I.

IN THE AVENUE.

"I'm to keep to the right?"

"Keep on a bearin' to the right, sir, 'cross Watch Common, and down One Ash Hill, and that'll bring you straight on to Poynings, sir! No luggage, sir?"

"None, thank you!"

"Luggage! no! I should think not! party's without a overcoat, don't you see, Thomas?--without a overcoat, and it freezin' like mad! Poynings, indeed! What's he doin' there? He don't look much like one of the company! More like after the spoons, I should say!"

The polite porter who had made the inquiry, and the satirical station-master who had commented on the reply, remained gazing for a minute or two at the stranger who had just arrived at the Amherst station of the South-Eastern Railway, and then went back to the occupations from which the premonitory whistle had called them; which, in the porter's case, consisted of a retirement to a little wooden watch-box where, surrounded by oil-cans, grease-boxes, dirty swabs of cloth, and luggage-barrows reared on end and threatening with their fore-feet, he proceeded to the mending of his shoes with a bit of tin and a few tacks, while the stationmaster turned to the accounts which extracted the marrow from his very soul, and carried on what he called the "tottle" of a drove of two hundred and sixty oxen, conveyed at per head.

"Freezing like mad." The station-master was right. The frost, which of late years holds aloof, utterly destroying the pictorial prophecies of the artists of the illustrated periodicals regarding Christmas Day, and which, with the exception of a two days' light rime, had left January a moist and muggy month, had set in with the commencement of February, hard, black, and evidently lasting. The iron-bound roads rang again, even under the thin boots of the stranger, who hurried over them with a light and fleeting step. The sharp keen air whirling over bleak Watch Common so penetrated his light, Londonish clothing, that he shivered horribly, and, stopping for an instant, beat his sides with his hands in an awkward manner, as one to whom the process was new, and who was vainly endeavouring to imitate some action he had seen. Then he hurried on with a short rapid jerking step, essentially different from the league-swallowing swinging pace of the regular pedestrian accustomed to exercise; stumbling over the frozen solid ruts made by the heavy cart-wheels, slipping on the icy puddles, and ever and anon pausing to take fresh breath, or to place his hand against his loudly-beating heart. As he skirted the further edge of the common, and arrived at the brow of the hill which the porter had mentioned to him, and which he recognized by the solitary tree whose branches rustled above him in the night wind, he heard, by the chimes of a distant church, ten o'clock rung out sharp and clear through the frosty air. He stopped, counted each chime, and then set off again at a quickened pace, his progress down the descent being easier now, muttering to himself as he went:

"Ten o'clock! I must press on, or they'll all be in bed, I suppose. Beastly respectable, old Carruthers, from what I can make out from my mother, and what little I saw of him! Servants up to prayers and all that kind of thing. No chance of getting hold of her, if I can't make her know I am there, before those prayers come off. Glass of cold water and flat candlestick directly they're over, I suppose, and a kiss to Missy and God bless you all round, and off to bed! By George, what a life! What an infernal, moping, ghostly, dreary existence! And yet they've got money, these scoundrels, and old Carruthers could give you a cheque that would make you wink. Could! Yes, but wouldn't, especially to me! Ba, ba, black sheep, and all the rest of it! Here's a poor tainted mutton for you, without the wind being in the least tempered to him! Jove, it goes through me like a knife! There'll be a public somewhere near, I suppose, and when I have seen my mother, I'll step off there and have some hot rum-and-water before turning in. Hold up, there, you hawbuck brute, pull your other rein! What's the use of your lamps, if they don't show you people in the road?"

He had sprung aside as he spoke, and now stood flat against and pushing into the leafless hedge as a carriage with flashing lamps and steaming horses whirled so closely by him as almost to brush his arm. The coachman paid no attention to his outcry, nor did the footman, who, almost hidden in overcoats, was fast asleep in the rumble behind. The next instant the carriage was whirling away; but the pedestrian, seeing the condition of the footman, had swung himself on to the hind step, and, crouching down behind the rumble and its unconscious occupant, obtained a shelter

from the bitter wind, and simultaneously a lift on his road. There he crouched, clinging firmly with both hands in close proximity to the enshrouded knees of the unconscious footman--knees which, during their owner's sleep, were very helpless and rather comic, which smote each other in the passage of every rut, and occasionally parted and displayed a dreary gulf of horsecloth between them, to be brought together at the next jolt with a very smart concussion--and there he remained until the stopping of the carriage, and a sharp cry of "Gate" from the coachman, induced him to descend from his perch, and to survey the state of affairs from that side of the carriage most removed from a certain light and bustle into which they had entered. For, on the other side of the carriage to that on which the stranger stood, was an old-fashioned stone lodge with twinkling lights in its little mullioned windows, and all its thousand ivy-leaves gleaming in the carriage-lamps, and happy faces grouped around its door. There was the buxom lodge-keeper the centre of the group, with her comely red face all aglow with smiles; and there was her light-haired, sheep-faced husband standing by the swinging iron gates; and there were the sturdy children, indulged with the unwonted dissipation of "sitting up;" and there was the gardener's wife awaiting to see company come in, while her master had gone up to look at fires in hothouses; and there were Kidd, the head keeper, and little Tom, his poor idiot boy, who clapped his hands at the whirling lights of the carriages, and kept up an incessant boom of imbecile happiness. Sheep-faced male lodge-keeper bobbing so furiously as to insist on

recognition, down goes window of carriage furthest from the stranger, and crisp on the night air cries a sharp curt voice,

"How do, Bulger? Not late, eh? hum--ah! not late?"

To which Bulger, pulling at invisible lock of hair on forehead:

"No, Sir Thomas! Lots company, Sir Thomas! Seasonable weather, Sir--"

But the carriage was whirled away before Bulger could conclude, and before the stranger could resume his place under the sheltering lee of the now conscious footman. He shrank back into the darkness--darkness deeper and thicker than ever under the shadow of the tall elms forming the avenue leading to the house, and remained for a minute buried in thought.

The night was clear, and even light, with the hard chilly light of stars, and the air was full of cold--sharp, pitiless, and piercing. The wind made itself heard but rarely, but spared the wayfarer not one pang of its presence. He shrank and shivered, as he peered from under the gaunt branches of the trees after the carriage with its glittering lights.

"Just like my luck!" he thought bitterly. "Nothing is to be wanting to make me feel myself the outcast that I am. A stranger in my mother's house, disowned und proscribed by my mother's husband, slinking like a thief behind the carriages of my mother's fine friends. I will see my mother, I must see her; it is a desperate chance, but surely it must succeed. I have no doubt of *her*, God bless her! but I have my doubts of her power to do what I want."

He emerged from the shadow of the trees again, and struck into the avenue. He quickened his pace, shivering,

and seeing the long line of way lying level before him in the sombre glimmer of the night, he went on with a more assured step. Angry and bitter thoughts were keeping the young man company, a gloomy wrath was in his dark, deep-set eyes, and the hands which he thrust into his coat-pockets clenched themselves with an almost fierce impatience. He strode on, muttering, and trying to keep up an air of hardihood (though there was no one to be deceived but himself), which was belied by the misgivings and remorse at his heart.

"A fine place and a grand house, plenty of money, and all that money gives, and no place for her only son! I wonder how she likes it all! No, no, I don't; I know she is not happy, and it's my fault, and HIS." His face grew darker and more angry, and he shook his clenched hand towards a stately house, whose long lighted façade now became visible.

"And *his*--*his* who married my mother and deceived her, who gave her hopes he never intended to fulfil--my ill conduct the cause of his forbidding her to bring me here!--he always hated me; he hated me before he saw me, before he ever knew that I was not a sucking dove for gentleness and a pattern of filial obedience and propriety; he hated me because I existed--because I was my mother's son; and if I had been the most amenable of stepsons, he would have hated me all the same, only he would have shown his hatred differently, that's all. I should have been brought here, and made to feel insignificance, instead of being left to beg or starve, for all he cares. I am better off as it is."

A harsh smile came over his face for a moment. "Quite a blackguard, and all but a beggar. All but? No, quite a

beggar, for I am coming to beg of my mother--coming to your fine house, Capel Carruthers, like a thief or a spy; slinking in at your gates, under cover of your fine friends' fine carriages; a prodigal stepson, by Jove, without the faintest chance of a welcome, and every probability of being turned out, if discovered. Company here, too, of all nights in the year, to make it more difficult to get hold of old Brookes unsuspected, but not so unfortunate either, if I'm seen. Hangers about are to be found even in the country, I suppose, on festive occasions. There's the house at last! A grand place, grim as it is under the stars, with a twinkling firmament of its own on the ground floor. The lights look warm. Good God, how cold it is out here!" Again he drew back close to the tall dark stems of the trees, to let a carriage pass; when it had discharged its load under the portico, he emerged cautiously upon the broad carriage sweep by which the company were arriving.

The house was an old one, and was surrounded by a narrow fosse or ditch, which in former days might have been full of water, and used for defensive purposes, but which was now drained and dry, and served as a kind of area, looked into by the windows in the basement. Above this fosse, and stretching away on either side of the heavy portico, was a broad and handsome stone terrace, the left hand portion of which lay in deep shadow, while the right hand portion was chequered with occasional light, which made its way through the partially closed shutters of the ball-room. Cautiously crossing the broad drive, and slipping behind a carriage which was just discharging its load at the hall door, George Dallas, the stranger whose fortunes we

have so far followed, crept into a dark angle of the porch until the crunching of the gravel and the clanging of the door announced the departure of the carriage, and then, climbing the balustrade of the terrace, and carefully avoiding the lines of light, made his way to the window of the room, and peered in. At first, he shook so with the cold, that he could not concentrate his attention on what was passing before his eyes; but having groped about and found a small tree which was carefully protected with a large piece of matting, and which flanked one end of the balustrade, he quietly removed the matting, and, wrapping it round him, returned to his position, watching and commenting on the scene of which he was a spectator.

It was an old room on which George Dallas looked--an old room with panelled walls, surmounted by a curious carved frieze and stuccoed roof, and hung round with family portraits, which gave it a certain grim and stern air, and made the gay hothouse flowers, with which it was lavishly decorated, seem out of keeping. Immediately opposite the window stood the entrance door, wide open, and flanked by the usual bevy of young men, who, from laziness or bashfulness, take some time to screw their courage up to dancing-point. Close in front of them was a group which at once arrested George Dallas's attention.

It consisted of three persons, of whom two were gentlemen; the third was a young girl, whose small white-gloved hand rested on the arm of the older of her companions, who, as George Dallas caught sight of them, was in the act of presenting the younger to her. The girl was tall, slight, very graceful and elegant, and extremely fair.

Her features were not clearly discernible, as she stood sideways towards the window; but the pose of the head, the bend of the neck, the braids of fair hair closely wound round the well-shaped head, and worn without any ornament but its own golden gloss, the sweeping folds of her soft white dress--all bore a promise of beauty, which indeed her face, had he seen it, would have fully realized. He saw her bow, in graceful acknowledgment of the introduction, and then linger for a few minutes talking with the two gentlemen--to the younger of whom George Dallas paid no attention whatever; after which she moved away with him to join the dancers. The older man stood where she had left him, and at him. George Dallas looked with the fixed intensity of anger and hatred.

"There you are," he muttered, "you worthy, respectable, hard-hearted, unblemished gentleman! There you are, with your clear complexion and your iron-grey whiskers, with your cold blue eyes and your white teeth, with your thin lips and your long chin, with your head just a little bald, and your ears just a little shrivelled, but not much; with your upright figure, and your nice cool hands, and your nice cool heart, too, that never knew an ungratified lust, or a passion which wasn't purely selfish. There you are, the model of respectability and wealth, and the essence of tyranny and pride! There you are--and you married my beautiful mother when she was poor, and when her son needed all that she could give him, and more; and you gave her wealth, and a fine house, and fine friends, and your not remarkably illustrious name, and everything she could possibly desire, except the only thing she wanted, and the only thing, as I

believe, for which she married you. That's your niece, of course, the precious heiress, the rich and rare young lady who has a place in your house, though the son of its mistress is banished from it. That's the heiress, who probably does not know that I exist. I should not be surprised if he had ordered my mother to conceal the disgraceful fact. Well, the girl is a nice creature, I dare say; she looks like it. But where can my mother be?"

He approached the window still more closely; he ventured to place his face close to the panes for a moment, as he peered anxiously into the room. "Where is my mother?" he thought. "Good Heaven! if she did but know that I am shivering here."

The strains of sweet clear music reached his ears, floods of light streamed out from the ball-room, a throng of dancers whirled past the window, he saw the soft fluttering dresses, he heard the rustle of the robes, the sounds of the gay voices, and the ring of laughter, and ever and anon, as a stray couple fell away from the dance, and lingered near the window, a fair young face would meet his gaze, and the happy light of its youth and pleasure would shine upon him. He lingered, fascinated, in spite of the cold, the misery of his situation, and the imminent risk of detection to which he was exposed. He lingered, and looked, with the longing of youth for gaiety and pleasure; in his case for a simple gaiety, a more sinless pleasure, than any he was wont to know. Suddenly he shrank quickly back and clutched hard at the covering of matting in which he had shrouded himself. A figure had crossed the window, between him and the light--a figure he knew well, and recognized with a beating heart--a

figure clad in purple velvet and decked with gleaming jewels; it was his mother. She passed hastily, and went up to Mr. Carruthers, then talking with another gentleman. She stretched out one jewelled arm, and touched him on the shoulder with her fan. Mr. Carruthers turned, and directly faced the window. Then George Dallas flung the matting which had covered him away, and left his hiding-place with a curse in his heart and on his lips.

"Yes, curse you," he said, "you dress her in velvet and diamonds, and make her splendid to entertain your company and flatter your pride, and you condemn her to such misery as only soft-hearted, strong-natured women such as she is can feel, all the time. But it won't do, Carruthers; she's my mother, though she's your wife, and you can't change her. I'll have some of your money, tyrant as you are, and slave as she is, before this night is over. I'm a desperate man; you can't make me more miserable than I am, and I *can* bring you to shame, and I *will*, too."

He stepped softly to the edge of the terrace, climbed the balustrade, and sat down cautiously on the narrow strip of grass beyond; then felt with his hands along the rough face of the wall which formed the front of the area. He looked down between his feet, the depth was about ten feet. He thought he might venture to let himself drop. He did so, and came safely on his feet, on the smooth sanded ground. An angle of the house was close to him; he turned it, and came upon a window whose shutters, like those of the upper range, were unclosed, and through which he could see into the comfortable room beyond. The room was low but large, and the heavy carved presses, the table with green baize

cover, the arm-chairs, one at each side of the fire, the serviceable, comfortable, and responsible appearance of the apartment, at once indicated its true character. It could be nothing but the housekeeper's room.

In the centre of the table stood an old-fashioned oil-lamp, no doubt banished from the upper regions when the moderator made its appearance in society; close to the stand was a large Bible open, a pair of spectacles lying upon the page. A brass-bound desk, a file of receipts, a Tunbridge-ware work-box, and a venerable inkstand, were also symmetrically arranged upon the table. The room was empty, and the observer at the window had ample leisure and opportunity to scrutinize it.

"I am in luck," he said. "This is Nurse Ellen's room. There are the dreadful old portraits which she always insisted on keeping over the chimney-piece, and venerated, quite as much because she thought them objects of art, as because she fancied them really like my father and mother. There's her Bible, with the date of my birth and christening in it. I dare say those are the identical spectacles which I broke, playing Red Riding Hood's grandmother. I wish she would come in, and come alone. What shall I do if she brings any one with her, and they close the shutters? How delightful the fire looks! I have a great mind to smash the window and get in. No one would hear the noise with all that crashing music overhead, and there does not seem to be a soul on this side of the house."

Xo sound of footsteps made itself audible on the terrace above his head. He was sheltered a little more in his present position, but still the cold was bitter, and he was shivering.

The impulse to break the window grew stronger. He thought how he should avoid cutting his hand; his shabby gloves could not protect him, suppose he were to take off his waistcoat, and twist it around his hand and arm. He had unfastened one button of his coat, as the idea occurred to him, when a sound overhead, on the house side, caught his ear. It was the click produced by opening the fastening of a French window. Then came steps upon the light balcony, which was one of the modern decorations of the old building, and voices which reached him distinctly.

"Any influenza you may catch, or anything of that kind, you must ascribe to yourself, Miss Carruthers. You would come out this--hum--by Jove--awful night!"

"Oh, don't fear for me, Captain Marsh," said a light girlish voice, laughingly, "I'm country bred, you know, and accustomed to be out in all weathers, so that I run no risk; and though it is wintry enough outside, the temperature of that room was becoming unbearable!"

"Think it must be caused by that old woman's red face that we noticed, or the thingummy--paradise feather in her cap. She with the very thin daughter. Don't you know?"

"Of course I know. The old lady is my aunt, Lady Boldero; the young one is my cousin Blanche!"

"Haw, by Jove, sorry I spoke, haw! By-the-by, that was Sir Thomas Boldero's park, where I met you riding on Friday, wasn't it, Miss Carruthers?"

"Yes. I was taking a short cut home, as I thought I should be late for dinner."

"You were going a rattling good pace, I noticed. Seemed quite to have distanced your groom."

"My groom! That's a luxury I very seldom indulge in--never, when I think I can dispense with it without my uncle's knowledge. It is disagreeable to me to have a man perpetually at my heels!"

"You shouldn't say that, Miss Carruthers--shouldn't, indeed. You don't know how pleasant it is--for the man."

"Very pretty indeed, Captain Marsh! And now that you've had the chance of paying a compliment, and have done it so neatly, we will go back, please. I begin to feel a little chilly."

As the speakers moved, something fell at George Dallas's feet. It was so dark in the corner where he stood, that he could not distinguish what it was, until the closing of the window above gave him assurance that he might move in safety. Then he bent forward, and found it was a sprig of myrtle. He picked it up, looked at it idly, and put it into the breast-pocket of his coat.

"What a sweet voice she has!" he thought. "A sweet face too, I am sure; it must be so, to match the voice and the hair. Well, she has given me something, though she didn't intend it, and will probably never know it. A spirited, plucky girl, I am sure, for all her grace and her blonde style. Carries too many guns for the captain, that's clear!"

He dived down in the midst of his thoughts, for the door of the room into which he had been looking, opened quietly, and an elderly woman in a black silk dress entered. After casting a glance round her, she was about to seat herself at the table, when Dallas gave two low taps in quick succession at the window. The woman started and looked towards the spot whence the sound came with a half-keen, half-frightened glance, which melted into unmixed

astonishment when Dallas placed his face close to the glass and beckoned to her with his hand. Then she approached the window, shading her eyes from the candlelight and peering straight before her. When she was close to the window, she said, in a low firm voice:

"Who are you? Speak at once, or I'll call for help!"

"It's I, Nurse Ellen. I--"

"Good Heavens, Master George!"

"Yes, yes; open the window and let me in. I want to talk to you, and I'm half dead with cold. Let me in. So. That's it."

The woman gently raised the sash, and so soon as the aperture admitted of the passage of his body, he slipped through and entered the room, taking no notice of his old nurse, but making straight for the fire, before which he knelt, gazing hungrily at the flumes, and spreading both his hands in eager welcome of the blaze. The old woman closed the window and then came softly behind him, placed her hand on his head, and, leaning over his shoulder and looking into his face, muttered: "Good Lord, how changed you are, my boy! I should scarcely have known you, except for your eyes, and they're just the same; but in everything else, how changed!"

He was changed indeed. The last time George Dallas had taken farewell of his old nurse, he had parted from her, a big strong healthy youth of eighteen, with short curly brown hair, clear skin, bright complexion, the incarnation of youth and strength and health. He knelt before her now, a gaunt grisly man, with high cheek-bones and hollow rings round his great brown eyes, with that dead sodden pallor which a life of London dissipation always produces, and with long

thin bony hands with which he clutched hold of the old woman, who put her arms round him and seemed about to burst into a fit of sobbing.

"Don't do that, nurse! don't do that! I'm weak myself, and seedy, and couldn't stand it. Get me something to drink, will you? And, look here! I must see my mother to-night, at once. I've come from town on purpose, and I must see her."

"She does not know you are here!" asked Mrs. Brookes, while she gazed mournfully at the young man, still kneeling before the fire. "But of course she does not, or she would have told me."

"Of course, of course, Nurse Ellen," said George Dallas; "she knows nothing about it. If I had asked her leave, she would not have dared to give it. How is she, nurse? How does she like her life? She tells me very little of herself when she writes to me, and that's not often." He rose from his knees now, and pulled a ponderous black horsehair chair close to the fire, seated himself in it, and sat huddled together, as though cold even yet, with his feet on the broad old-fashioned fender. "I had to come at any risk. You shall know all about it, nurse; but now you must contrive to tell my mother I am here."

"How can I do that, Master George?" asked the old woman, in a tone of distress and perplexity. "She is in the ball-room, and all the grand folk are looking at her and talking to her. I can't go in among them, and if I could, she would be so frightened and put about, that master would see in a moment that something had happened. He is never far off were she is."

"Ha!" said George gloomily; "watches her, does he, and that kind of thing?"

"Well, not exactly," said Mrs. Brookes; "not in a nasty sort of way. I must say, to do him justice, though I don't much like him, that Mr. Carruthers is a good husband; he's fond of her, and proud of her, and he likes to see her admired."

The young man interrupted her with selfish heedlessness.

"Well, it's a pity he has the chance to-night; but, however it's managed, I must see her. I have to go back to town to-morrow, and of course I can't come about here safely in the daytime. Think of some plan, nurse, and look sharp about it."

"I might go upstairs and join the servants--they are all about the ball-room door--and watch for an opportunity as she passes."

"That will take time," said George, "but it's the best chance. Then do it, nurse, and give me something to eat while you are away. Will any of the servants come in here? They had better not see me, you know."

"No, you are quite safe; they are looking at the dancing," she answered, absently, and closing as she spoke the shutters of the window by which he had entered. She then left the room, but quickly returned, bringing in a tray with cold meat, bread, and wine. He still sat by the tire, now with his head thrown back against the high straight back of his chair, and his hands thrust into his pockets.

"Very plain fare, Master George," said the housekeeper, "but I can't find anything better without wasting time."

"Never mind, nurse. I'm not hungry, and I'm not above eating cold meat if I were. Beggars must not be choosers, you know; and I'm little better than a beggar, as you also know. Give me some wine. It isn't felony, is it, though I have got into my stepfather's house through the window, and am drinking his wine without his knowledge or consent?"

His tone was very painful to the faithful old woman's ear. She looked at him wistfully, but made no reply. He rose from the chair by the fire, sullenly drew another chair to the table, and sat down by the tray. Mrs. Brookes left the room, and took her way along the white stone passage which led to the entrance hall of the mansion. Passing through a swinging door covered with crimson cloth, she entered a spacious square hall, decorated, after the fashion of country houses, with stags' heads and antlers. The floor was of polished oak, and uncarpeted, but at each of the six doors which opened into it lay a soft white rug. A bright fire blazed in the ample grate; and through the open door of the ballroom, light and the sound of music poured into the hall. A number of servants were standing about, some lingering by the fire, a few ranged close to the door of the dancing-room, exchanging comments upon the performances with perfect impunity. Under cover of the music Mrs. Brookes joined the group, which respectfully gave way at her approach, and ceded to her the front place. She looked anxiously, and for some time vainly, for her mistress. At length she perceived her, but she was seated at the further end of the room, in conversation with an elderly lady of extraordinary magnificence in point of apparel, and who required to be spoken to through an ear-trumpet. Mrs.

Carruthers was not a skilful performer upon that instrument, and was obliged to give her whole mind to it, so that there was little chance of her looking in any other direction than the uninviting one of Mrs. Chittenden's ear for the present. Mrs. Brookes looked on impatiently, and longed for a break in the dancing, and a consequent movement among the company. At length the music ceased, the panting waltzers subsided into promenade, and Mrs. Carruthers rose to place her chair at the disposal of a young lady whose exertions had told upon her, and who breathlessly accepted the boon. As she stood for a moment turned towards the door, she caught sight of the housekeeper's face, and saw she looked pale and agitated. Catching her mistress's eye, the housekeeper made a slight stealthy sign. Very gracefully, and with perfect calm, the tall figure, in its sweeping velvet dress, made its way through the dispersed groups between it and the door, from which all the servants had precipitately retreated at the cessation of the music. What was wrong? Mrs. Carruthers thought. Something, she knew, must be wrong, or Ellen would not be there beckoning to her. A second gesture, still more stealthy and warning, caused her to pause when within reach of the housekeeper's whisper, without turning her head towards her.

"What is it, Ellen?"

"Hush! where is master? Can he see you?"

"Yes, he is just beyond the screen. What is the matter?"

"Turn round, and stoop; let me tie your shoe--there!"

Mrs. Carruthers stood in the doorway, and bent her head, holding her foot out, and lifting her dress. Mrs. Brookes fumbled with the shoe, as she whispered rapidly:

"Come as soon as you can to my room. Be careful that you are not missed. Some one is there who wants to see you."

"To see me, Ellen? On such a night, and at such an hour! What is wrong? Who is there?"

The old woman looked earnestly into the frightened face, bending over her, and said rather with her lips than with her voice: "Master George!"

CHAPTER II.

IN THE HOUSEKEEPER'S ROOM.

George Dallas had eaten but sparingly of the food which Mrs. Brookes had placed before him. He was weary and excited, and he bore the delay and the solitude of the housekeeper's room with feverish impatience. He strode up and down the room, stooping occasionally before the fire to kick at the crumbling logs, and glance at the clock, which marked how rapidly the night was waning. Half an hour, which seemed three times as much to him, had elapsed since Mis Brookes had left him. Faintly and indistinctly the sounds of the music reached him, adding to his irritation and weariness. A savage frown darkened his face, and he muttered to himself in the same tone as that of his spasmodic soliloquy in the avenue:

"I wonder if she's thinking that I ought to be there too; or if I ought not, neither ought she. After all, I'm her son, and she might make a stand-up fight for me, if she would. He's fond of her, the old woman says, and proud of her, and well he may be. What's the use of it all, if she can't manage him? What fools women are! If they only could calculate at first, and take their own line from the beginning, they could manage any men. But she's afraid of him, and she lets him find it out. Well, well, it must be wretched enough for her, too. But why does she not come?"

He had to wait a little longer yet, for another quarter of an hour had elapsed before Mrs. Brookes returned.

"Is she coming?" he asked eagerly, when at length the pale-faced little woman gently entered the room.

"Yes, she is coming. She has to wait until the first lot are gone in to supper. Then master will not miss her."

The old woman came up to him, and took his right hand in hers, looking fondly, but keenly, into his face, and laying the other hand upon his shoulder. "George," she said, "George, my darling boy, I hope you have not brought her very bad news."

He tried to laugh as he loosed his hand, not unkindly, from the old woman's grasp.

"Do you suppose good news would have brought me here where I am forbidden--smuggled goods?"

She shook her head sorrowfully.

"At all events, you are alive and well to tell your ill news yourself, and that is everything to her," said Mrs. Brookes.

The next moment the door opened, and Mrs. Carruthers came in with a hurried step. George Dallas started forward,

and caught her in his arms.

"Mother! mother!" "My boy, my darling boy!" were the only words spoken between them, until they were quite alone.

Mrs. Brookes left the room, and the young man was free to explain his untimely visit.

"I dread to ask what brings you here, George," said his mother, as she seated herself upon the heavy sofa, and drew him to her side. "I cannot but rejoice to see you, but I am afraid to ask you why you come."

A mingling of pleasure and apprehension shook her voice, and heightened her colour.

"You may well dread to ask me, mother," replied the young man gloomily. "You may well dread to ask what brings me, outcast as I am, to your fine home, to the place where your husband is master, and where my presence is forbidden."

"George, George!" said his mother, in a tone of grief and remonstrance.

"Well, I know it's no fault of yours, but it's hard to bear for all that, and I'm not quite such a monster as I am made out to be, to suit Mr. Carruthers's purposes. I'm not so very much worse than the young men, mother, whose stepfathers, or whose own fathers either, don't find it necessary to forbid them the house. But you're afraid of him, mother, and--"

"George," said Mrs. Carruthers quietly, but sternly, "you did not come here to see me for the first time in nine months, at the risk of being turned out of Mr. Carruthers's house, simply to vent your anger upon him, and to accuse

me wrongfully, and taunt me with what I am powerless to prevent. Tell me what has brought you here, I can stay with you only a little while; at any moment I may be missed. Tell me what has brought you against my husband's commands, contrary to my own entreaties, though it is such a delight to me to see you even so." And the mother put her arms around the neck of her prodigal son, and kissed him fondly. Her tears were falling on his rough brown curls.

"Don't cry over me, mother; I'm not worth it; I never was; and you mustn't go back to your company with pale cheeks and red eyes. There, there, it's not so bad as it might be, you know; for as nurse says, I'm alive and well to tell it. The fact is--" He rose, and walked up and down the room in front of the sofa on which his mother was sitting, while he spoke. "The fact is, I must have money. Don't start, don't be frightened. I have not done anything very dreadful, only the consequences are nearly as fatal as if I had. I have not stolen, or forged, or embezzled property. I am not rich or respectable enough to get the chance. But I have lost a large sum at the gaming-table--a sum I don't possess, and have no other means than this of getting."

"Go on," said his mother. She was deadly pale now, and her hands were tightly clasped together, as they lay on her lap, white and slender, against the rich purple of her velvet dress.

He glanced at her, quickened his step, and continued in a hard reckless tone, but with some difficulty of utterance. "I should have been utterly ruined but for a friend of mine, who lent me the money. Play debts must be paid, mother; and Routh, though he's not much richer than I am, would

not let me be completely lost for want of a helping hand. But he had to borrow the money. He could get it lent to him. There's no one but him to lend *me* a shilling, and he did get it, and I had it and paid it away. But in a short time now he must pay it back and the interest upon it. Luck has been against us both."

"Against you *both*, George," said Mrs. Carruthers. "Is your friend also a gambler, then?"

"Yes, he is," said Dallas, roughly; "he is a gambler. All my friends are gamblers and drunkards, and everything that's bad. What would you have? Where am I to get pious, virtuous, respectable friends? I haven't a shilling; I haven't a character. Your husband has taken care I shall have no credit. Every one knows I am disowned by Mr. Carruthers, and forbidden to show my face at Poynings; and I'm not showing it; I'm only in the servants' quarters, you see." Again he laughed, and again his mother shrank from the sound. "But though my friend is a gambler, like myself, he helps me when I want help, and inconveniences himself to do it. Perhaps that's more than respectable friends--if I had them--would do for me. It's more than I have ever known respectable friends to do for any one."

Mrs. Carruthers rose, and turned her colourless face upon her son. There was an angry light in her large hazel eyes, whose dewy brightness time had not yet greatly harmed. As they confronted each other, a strong likeness between the mother and son asserted itself. "George," she said, "you are putting me to needless pain. You have said enough to show me that you are unchanged. You have come here, endangering my peace, and compromising yourself, for the

purpose, I suppose, of asking me for money to repay this person who relieved you from a gambling debt. Is this your business here?"

"Yes," he said shortly, and with a lowering brow.

"Then listen to me. I cannot give you any money." He started, and came close up to her. "No, George. I have no money at my disposal, and you ought to know that, as well as I know it. Every shilling I have ever had of my own I have given you. You know I never grudged it. You know you had at all; but that leaves me without resources. Mr. Carruthers will not help you." She grew paler still, and her lips trembled. "I have asked him many times to alter his determination, a determination which you cannot say is undeserved, George, but it is in vain. I might, perhaps, wonder that you would stoop to take assistance from a man who has such an opinion of you, and who has forbidden you his house, but that the sad knowledge I have gained of such lives as yours has taught me that they utterly destroy self-respect--that a profligate is the meanest of creatures. Calm yourself. There is no use in giving loose to your temper towards me, George. You have the power to afflict me still, but you can deceive me no more."

She sat down again, wearily, leaning her arm on the back of the sofa, and her head on her hand. There was silence for a few moments. Then she said:

"How much money do you owe this man, George, and when must it be paid?"

"I owe him a hundred and forty pounds, mother, and it must be paid this day month."

"A hundred and forty pounds?" repeated Mrs. Carruthers, in a terrified tone.

"Yes; precisely that sum, and I have not a pound in the world to exist on in the mean time. I am cleaned out, that's the fact," he went on, with a dismal attempt at speaking lightly; "and I can't carry on any longer." But he spoke to inattentive ears. His mother was lost in thought.

"I cannot give you money," she said at length. "I have not the command of any."

"This doesn't look like want of it," said her son bitterly, as he caught a handful of her velvet dress in his grasp, and then dropped it scornfully.

"My personal expenses are all dictated by Mr. Carruthers, George, and all known to him. Don't suppose I am free to purchase dress or not, as I choose. I tell you the exact truth, as I have always told you." She spoke coldly and seriously, like one whose mind is made up to a great trial, who hopes neither to alter its character nor to lessen its weight.

"I only know I must have it," he said; "or I don't see any resource for me except to cut my throat."

"No, no," returned his mother, "do not say such dreadful things. Give me time. I will try to find some way of helping you by the time you must have the money. O my boy, my boy!" she covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

George Dallas looked at her irresolutely, then came quickly towards her, and leaned over her, as she sat. "Mother," he said, in low hurried tones, "mother, trust me once more, little as I deserve it. Try to help me in this matter; it is life or death to me; and I will try and do better. I am sick of it all; sick of my own weakness above and more

than all. But I am irretrievably ruined if I don't get this money. I am quite in Routh's power--and--and--I want to get out of it."

She looked up curiously at him. Something in the way he said those words at once alarmed and reassured her.

"In this man's power, George? How? To what extent?"

"I cannot tell you, mother; you would not understand. Don't frighten yourself about it. It is nothing that money cannot settle. I have had a lesson now. You shake your head--well, I know I have had many before, but I *will* learn from this one."

"I have not the money, George," his mother repeated, "and I cannot possibly procure it for a little time. You must not stay here."

"I know, I know," he retorted. "You need not re-echo Mr. Carruthers's interdict. I am going; but surely you can give me a little now; the price of one of these things would go a long way with me." As he spoke, he touched, with no rough hand, her earrings and the bracelets on her right arm.

"They are family jewels, or you should have them, George," Mrs. Carruthers said in a sad voice. "Give me time, and I will make up the money for you. I have a little I can give you." She stood up and looked fixedly at him, her hands resting on his shoulder. The tall and powerful young man, with his haggard anxious face, his hardened look, his shabby careless dress, offered a strange contrast to the woman, whose beauty time had dealt with so lightly, and fortune so generously. Mrs. Carruthers had been a mere girl when her son was born, and probably had not been nearly so beautiful as now, when the calm dignity of position and