

A FEARFUL RISK: OF BARBARA'S DANGER.

CHAPTER III.—Continued.

"Yes she made one stipulation—that she should not be worried about any of the arrangements; she left everything in my hands, even the fixing of the wedding-day."

"You cannot tell what this is to me! I have had a letter from my father urging my return. I feel as if a burden had rolled from my shoulders. Of course Sir Robert, there is no need for delay."

"Of course not. I'll telegraph for my solicitor; he'll be down to-morrow to draw up the settlements. Why, you might be married next week if you wanted to."

"His listener did want to, more than words could tell."

"I think Tuesday," he said, speaking as though it were a matter of course—"yes Tuesday would suit admirably."

"It's rather soon."

"Not at all. Barbara can wear one of her morning dresses; she will be as fair in my eyes as though she was decked in silk and pearls."

They had not expected any opposition from Lady Grey: they met with it though. That lady told them the haste was indecent.

"He must have some evil motive for being in such a desperate hurry," she told her husband.

"Nonsense, my dear!" he answered testily; "he is a most charming young man; your dislike to him is nothing in the world but prejudice."

Lady Grey went in search of her niece. "Barbara, is this true?"

Bab looked prettier than ever. A good night's rest had soothed her anxiety; besides she had the stranger's promise he would come to her rescue and save her from her unwelcome lover.

Bab could not share this source of comfort with her aunt; she almost wished she could when she saw the troubled face that bent over her.

"Uncle says so."

"And you are really going to marry the man? Barbara, you can't love him."

Barbara shook her head.

"Uncle Robert wishes it. Aunt, I will tell you a great great secret. I'm quite certain I shall not marry Mr. Carlyle; they may fix my wedding-day, and order a wedding-cake, but I know I shall not marry him."

"Do you mean you are ill, child?" asked Lady Grey with a smothered sob; "so ill that—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Bab blithely; "I never was better. And, aunt, you are not to fret. I won't marry him—why, I'd rather run away."

"But your uncle?"

"He will forgive me. I can't explain, aunt dear; but it will come all right—I know it will."

"But, my dear, this is Thursday, and your uncle says you are to be married on Tuesday. He and Mr. Carlyle are gone to London to-day to see about the settlements and license."

Bab bore this news bravely.

"Well, aunt, the suspense won't be so long. In a week's time things must be settled."

Lady Grey came to the conclusion that the trouble had turned Bab's head.

"Will you drive with this afternoon?"

"No, thank you, aunt; I have something very particular to do. I shall be out till four o'clock."

It seemed mystic on mystery.

It was all very well to trust in the stranger's promise, but as the days wore on poor Bab grew very unhappy. She had pledged herself to marry Geoffrey Carlyle on Tuesday; she knew perfectly well such a step would make her wretched and yet she had not the courage to risk her uncle's displeasure by recalling her rash promise.

And the stranger? He might fail her; he might have no real power to help her; or even if he meant to be her friend, the awful suddenness of the wedding might prevent his efforts being effectual.

So it was a very troubled face which the real Geoffrey Carlyle met that afternoon in the lime-tree walk, and yet withal so fair a one that the young man had much ado to keep from taking Barbara in his arms, and then there confessing the whole truth to her.

"I was afraid you would not come."

"I never broke a promise in my life."

"But this was only to a stranger; I have no possible claim on your kindness," said Bab.

"I do not look upon Laurence Grey's daughter as a stranger; and you have the stronger possible claim on me, for your father's sake."

Bab sighed.

"I don't think you can help me. Fancy they have settled I am to be married on Tuesday."

"Never mind; only trust me."

"I do, more than anyone in the world, only—"

"Only a remedy to your difficulties seems beyond my power. Have patience, and you shall see."

Bab gave a little sob.

"Things seem black enough any way."

"How?"

"Even if you free me from this man, if you make my uncle see it would be misery for me to marry him, you can't help his being disappointed."

"Who? Sir Robert?"

"Yes, you don't understand it, perhaps; but he loves the Abbey almost as if it were a human being; he will mourn bitterly over it passing to such a man. My happy home will be nothing but sadness and regret."

"Poor child!"

"Don't," she said testily. "It is almost a month since I was eighteen; I don't feel a bit like a child."

"You seem a child to me."

"Are you very old?"

"Twenty-eight."

"And I suppose you are married? I wish you lived in England."

"I am not married. Why do you wish I lived in England, Miss Grey?"

"If you had, and your wife had been nice, you might have invited to come and stay with you, just till things got smoother at home."

He smiled.

"I mean to live in England some day."

"Do you?"

"Certainly; it has been my father's dearest wish for years to end his days in England. Lately he has had a severe illness, and that has resolved him quite. He is winding up our affairs in Port Elizabeth and in a few months he will come home."

"For good?"

"For good and all; we have so many friends out there that I dare say I shall often run over for a few weeks, but henceforward my real home will be in England."

"Then you are rich—I mean you don't have to work for your living?"

"I have worked hard for it a good many years."

"I wish I could work for mine."

"Miss Grey—Barbara!"

"I do. I know, however this ends, I shall be unhappy. Uncle and aunt will want me to go back to my childish pleasures, and somehow I couldn't; these last three weeks have been very sad ones, and they have made me into a woman. I don't think childish things would satisfy me now."

"You will have another home than your uncle's some day," said her companion in a strange smothered tone; "you don't suppose men will be blind enough to leave you there?"

"I don't know any men."

"You will be a happy wife before many months."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know; only I should be afraid now to think of such things. I wish I had had a mother. You say my father was your friend, and used to talk to you about me years ago—I wish you would adopt me as a sort of sister."

He shook his head.

"I would rather be your friend now, Miss Grey."

"Barbara," she corrected him, "if we are to be friends."

"Barbara, then. You are not to trouble yourself about Tuesday—trust to me. It will be all right. Come to me here to-morrow at the same time, and tell me how things are progressing."

That night she met her lover for the first time since her acceptance of his suit; he came towards her with a passionate happiness in his eyes.

"My Barbara," he murmured; "mine at last."

"No," retorted Bab; "I am not your Barbara, and I won't be called so. I am my own till Tuesday; after then—"

"After then?"

"We will not talk of that."

"But we must talk of it, Barbara. Where shall we go for our honeymoon?"

"I don't know—I don't care!"

"At least kiss me," he pleaded almost fervently; "let me have one touch of your lips, my Barbara—my wife so soon to be."

But Barbara turned and fled from the room.

CHAPTER IV.

Day after day Geoffrey Carlyle and Barbara met in the lime-tree walk.

Barbara had grown to regard him as her only stronghold to escape from the coming marriage. She trusted him so implicitly that in spite of its seeming impossibility, she fully believed he would find a way to rescue her from the disagreeable union to which she had pledged herself.

She had to keep him informed of the preparations for her marriage; that was the ostensible reason for their meetings; but of the hours they spent together very few were devoted to that subject.

It seemed to her she had found the something she had always missed; that the perfect sympathy she had yearned after and never gained was really hers at last; and that a strange blank feeling of dismay seized her as she tried to realise what her life would be when her friend left Merton, and she had to go back to the cold formality of her childhood's home and its ceremonies.

It was on Monday this first troubled her. Within the Abbey all was busy preparation for her wedding. Her heart almost sank as she recognized that in four-and-twenty hours, unless the stranger redeemed his promise, she must stand at the altar with her detested suitor.

Lady Grey was in a state of tearful resignation; her husband jubilant; the lover restless and excited.

Bab stole away from them all out into the lime-tree walk with an aching heart.

And for once her friend failed her—for once she was first at the trying-place, and search as she would, her eyes could not descry the tall stately figure she had learned to know so well.

"He never meant to help me—he doesn't care what becomes of me!"

And the poor girl flung herself on the ground and sobbed as bitterly as on the afternoon when she made the fatal mistake of accepting her unloved suitor.

"Barbara!"

She looked up. The stranger was watching her with a troubled face.

"Barbara, what is it?"

Bab forgot all ceremony; she dried her eyes, and murmured sorrowfully:

"I thought you have forsaken me."

"You could not trust me?" reproachfully.

"I trusted you till—I came here and found no trace of you."

"I am very sorry to have kept you waiting, I was obliged to go to London on business."

"Ah!"

"Cheer up, Barbara?"

"I can't. Don't you know it is to-morrow—to-morrow, and we have done nothing?"

"We have done everything? I possess such evidence of your—your lover's delinquencies that Sir Robert will be too glad to send him about his business."

"And you will go to uncle to-night?"

"If you wish it."

"Don't you wish it? Don't you care whether I am happy or wretched for life?"

"I fear I care too much."

"Too much?"

"Ay, Barbara; these meetings have all been too pleasant for me. Child, can't you guess the mischief they have brought?"

She shook her head.

"I only know I have been happy. You have been kinder to me than anyone in the world."

"I wish you would go on letting me be kind to you, Barbara. Child, after this week of intimacy, how am I to give you up?"

"Her eyes filled with tears."

"I shall miss you bitterly."

"And I you."

"I dread your going away; it makes me wretched to think of saying good-bye."

"Need we say it, Barbara? My darling, I have learnt to hold you dearer than aught on earth! Barbara, don't you think you can trust yourself to me—to love and to cherish till death do us part?"

"That sounds so solemn, like the marriage-service;" and flatteringly she went on gently: "Ought one to make such a promise as that?"

"Only at the altar. Don't you understand, Bab, I am asking you to be my wife?"

"Your wife?"

"Even so. There are ten long years between us, but I think I could make you happy. You are my first love, Barbara; you will be my last."

"But—"

"I cannot explain all to you now, but I assure you I can offer you a home worthy of your birth. I shall probably settle in England, and only pay passing visits to Africa. I offer you the tenderest love; my father will cherish you as his own child—only, darling, I can have no divided heart. Do not come to me, my Barbara, unless you can give me love for love!"

She blushed.

"Are you quite sure?"

"I am positive that in all the world there is no wife for me but Barbara. I assure you Sir Robert will not oppose my wishes. Barbara, won't you tell me if I am to be happy?"

"I don't know."

"Try to tell me, sweet."

"I never thought of this—never once; only I felt this afternoon, when I thought you had left, the world would be one big blank."

"Don't you know what that means?"

"No."

"That your sleeping heart has awoke, and you have learned to love me. Barbara, put your hand in mine and promise to be my wife."

"If uncle will let me."

"I don't mean to ask him."

"Oh!"

"You have been so teased and troubled about this affair, why should you have fresh worry? I have a plan I think would smooth things wonderfully."

"What is it?"

"I want to-morrow after all to be your wedding-day, Barbara—yours and mine. Will you meet me early in the morning, sweetheart, and let me drive you to Merton village? You will be none long before breakfast at the Abbey, but you will be my wife. No one in the world will have the power to rob me of you."

"But—"

"But what sweetheart?"

"Isn't it wrong?" she murmured. "In years to come would people thing lightly of me because I came to you like that?"

"I would not let them, Barbara. I am waiting for your answer. Will you let to-morrow after all be our wedding-day? Will you be my much-beloved, dearly-cherished wife?"

She just murmured one word—"Yes."

It was so faint it hardly reached his ear, but it did reach it, and forthwith he gathered her in his arms and clasped her to his heart as one filled with a deep content.

"You shall have everything your own way," he murmured—"everything in the world except yourself."

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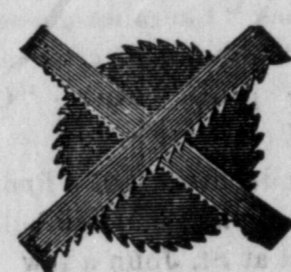
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Whereas, John Stevenson of Richibucto in the County of Kent, Crown Land Surveyor, and William Hudson of the same place, merchant, executors of the last will and testament of John Stevenson, late of Richibucto, aforesaid, deceased, have prayed that their accounts of the administration of the estate of the said John Stevenson, deceased, should be proved and allowed and that all parties interested in said estate should be cited to appear to attend the passing and allowing thereof.

You are therefore required to cite the heirs and all parties interested in the estate of the said John Stevenson, deceased, to appear before me at a Court of Probate to be held at Richibucto, in and for said county on Tuesday, the 30th day of June next at 11 o'clock in the forenoon at the office of the Registrar of Probate for said county for the purpose of passing and allowing the said accounts.

Given under my hand and the seal of the said Court this 23rd day of May, A.D. 1891.

HENRY H. JAMES,
Judge of Probate of Kent Co.

C. RICHARDSON,
Registrar of Probates County of Kent.

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