

NOW FIRST PUBLISHED.

A Winning Hazard,

BY MRS. ALEXANDER.

Author of "Her Dearest Foe," "The Wooing O'it," "A Crooked Path," &c., &c.

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CHAPTER XV.—VAIN DISQUIET.

Travers had some difficulty in making up his mind after this conversation. Apart from his dread of leaving Carey to drift about the great London ocean, without a pilot, his inclination was to go to Africa. He had strong belief in the future of the Dark Continent. Moreover, he knew his chances there would be excellent. Still, his deep attachment to Kate, made him hesitate. Could he believe that Carey's position in Wincks' office was safe, even for a couple of years, he would have ventured.

In this uncertainty, accident, as it sometimes seems to do, settled the question for him.

Two or three days after the garden party, Lord Balmuir asked Travers to run down to Torquay with him for a week, as he wished to see his sister, who was in delicate health, and also to get a rest, for the session, now drawing to a close, had been a trying one.

Travers therefore wrote to decline his invitation, he had received from Sir Edward Vance, the presiding genius of the expedition so often referred to, and accompanied his patron. The day following, he met Sir Edward face to face, as he was strolling along the sea-front. They joined forces and fell into rather confidential talk, remarking on the curious accident of their meeting, and the fact that it was Travers' refusal of his invitation which set Sir Edward free to visit his favorite haunt.

"It looks like fate, eh?" he said. "Why don't you listen to reason? I am going to meet Carey, and one or two other men connected with our scheme at Southampton, the week after next, come along and hear all we have to say. Why should you waste your life in the stagnation of a private secretaryship. Hey? You can only scrape along. You will never have a chance of making a pile. Of course, you have opportunities for picking up an heiress, but that's a beggarly style of thing after all. Throw in your lot with us, and you'll have first pick in a grand new country, and be governor of it, perhaps, one of these days."

Travers confessed it was a tempting scheme—and finally agreed to meet Sir Edward as suggested, by the keen old financier. Then he talked to Lord Balmuir, who confessed himself incapable of offering a sound opinion, as he was most reluctant to part with his secretary.

"You must not mind me, however," he added. "I am prejudiced; you must be guided by what you think will be best for yourself."

So Travers found himself contemplating as a possibility what ten days ago seemed out of the question.

Among the letters which awaited his return to town was a brief note from Tulloch. "Dear Travers,—If you can spare a couple of hours from your grandee friends, come and dine with me at my diggings on Tuesday at seven-thirty. I want your help and advice. Try and come." This was dated the previous Saturday. Travers looked through a crowd of cards which were all for evening parties, and then telegraphed his acceptance.

Tulloch was located in one of the smaller streets near Westbourne Terrace, in an expensive and comfortable lodging.

He received Travers with effusion, pressing him to eat and to drink with hearty hospitality, taking rather noisily of politics and city matters, while the servant was coming in and out, but evidently weighted with some personal difficulty to be discussed in private over the "wine and walnuts."

"Why, Travers, you neither eat nor drink," he exclaimed, when they were alone. "Try the port. It's rather a choice wine, I flatter myself."

"Thank you, I rarely touch port. Your claret is excellent. I don't often drink anything else."

"Well, I'll take my own prescriptions," returned Tulloch, "especially as I want something to fortify me," he added, with an uneasy laugh.

"No, no," said Travers, "I never was in a scrape yet; only in a little difficulty, more a matter of feeling, you know, than reality. Of course it is my own fault. I am too impulsive. In short—a—" he paused.

"Well?" said Travers, setting down his glass.

"The fact is I was a little overdone by my feelings, and—and this first-rate style of everything at the Ball—and—you'll grant it was a great temptation, for she's a dished handsome girl and dressed—by Jove, her turn-out was splendid! So I just asked her to marry me, and, rather to my surprise, she said yes!" There was exultation in Tulloch's tone as he said this, and he hastily swallowed a glass of port and began with renewed courage.

"Of course I am greatly gratified, for I could not do better, and her money will smooth my road pretty considerably; but, you see, I am not quite comfortable about—about Kate—Kate Carey." The murder was out, and a look of relief stole over Jamie's features.

"Indeed!" returned Travers, with much gravity. "Have you been so imprudent as to give her encouragement?"

"Don't speak in that way, Travers. I have the greatest respect for my kinswoman; indeed, I was considerably taken up with her, and if she had had even a trifle of money, it even her father and sister had had anything beyond their wits to live upon, I would have followed the inclination of my heart, and married her. But it wouldn't do, Travers—it really wouldn't do, especially since I saw this height of folly of which they are capable. When I found they were absolutely going to take that designing old French woman to live with them, and at free quarters, by George! I saw it was time to shove off. I said to myself: This will never do; you'd only put a mill stone round your neck, James my boy."

"It was certainly unwise," put in Travers. "Ay! You see it in the same light. So I made up my mind to renounce them all; and, take my advice, you do the same thing."

"Unfortunately, you see, I have not your strength of character," returned Travers, with an air of conviction.

"Perhaps not. But few men have. Now what troubles me, and what you can help me in that without any conceit or nonsense, I am afraid that Kate has grown fond of me, and rather expected I would propose for her. Woman are so unreasonable, so averse, to take a common sense view of things."

"Ha! This is a complication," ejaculated Travers solemnly.

"Yes, isn't it?" cried Tulloch. "But you, who have so often seen us together must have observed the favour the poor girl always showed me. Goodness knows I could have loved her well, if it hadn't been for that insane imprudence about that old French woman." Here he filled another consolatory bumper. "But it stands to reason, a girl who could act in that way is quite unfit to be the wife of a steady, hard-working, business man. All the same, I can't bear the idea of wounding her; in fact, I feel too much for other people, and you would do me the greatest favour if—it you would—a mind breaking the news to her. I don't think old Carey will give me any trouble. He is too headless and bamum-bamum to—"

"But Tulloch you ought not to make ducks and drakes of my feelings either. Fancy the trial it will be to witness her despair!"

"I know, I know, and I don't like to think of it, but—by George! Travers, I believe you are laughing. I am afraid you are rather a heartless fellow; you are a regular worrier. I cannot be so callous. Still you might do this for me. I am sure Kate has a sisterly regard for you, and a confidence in you which would make the job easier to you than to anyone else, and you might do so much for me."

"I am not going to refuse, Tulloch, and I'll do it all the more readily because I don't think Kate will break her heart about you."

"Oh! you don't, don't you? Well, I am sure I hope she won't. I trust in heaven she don't care a straw about me! But—" he shook his head tragically. "Ah! if I didn't have a sense of what is due to myself—that is, conscience, I never could have acted as I have done. What eyes she has! What a velvet soft white skin!" And Tulloch went on to enume the charms he had the resolution to renounce in favour of Mammon till Travers longed to throw a decanter at his head.

"That will do," he exclaimed, somewhat savagely.

"You have put your hand to the plough. There is no use in looking back. However, I am going out to Notting Hill in a day or two, and I shall break this terrible intelligence as tenderly as I can. Meantime I have one or two places to go to, and must wish you good night."

"What! going already? Why, this is treating a fellow shabbily. When can you dine with me? I promised 'Pen' to take you up one evening and present you."

"Who is 'Pen'?"

"Miss Golding."

"No, Tulloch, not yet! That would be too much for my feelings—to see poor, dear, deserted Kate's successful rival!"

"It's all deuced unpleasant," said Tulloch, seriously.

"You see the results of too strong a power of fascination."

"A fellow can never be sure if you are chaffing or not," exclaimed Tulloch.

Travers laughed, lit a fresh cigar, and departed.

The rest of the week was rather crowded with work and engagements, which included the wedding of Mrs. Hume, at which Travers and the lady's sister and brother-in-law were the only guests. It was not till the following Sunday, in the afternoon, that Travers was able to present himself at Oakley Villa.

Alicia had her bonnet on, and was just about to start for her Sunday school. Kate was reading, and Mr. Carey had a Sunday paper in his hand.

"Well, Mr. Travers?" he exclaimed good humouredly. "You are quite a stranger. What has become of you?"

Travers explained, and cordial greetings were exchanged, while he noticed that dusky shadows below her eyes gave a fresh pensive charm to her face, though her eyes lit up as he turned from her father to himself.

"It's a delightful day after the damp and drizzle of last week," exclaimed Travers, when Alicia had departed. "Suppose, Mr. Carey, we chartered a hansom—we are all three slim,—and drive down to Kew Gardens. It is lovely and shady there."

"Not I. I've come to that period of life where the greatest pleasure in life is rest and peace. I'm going to read myself to sleep with this paper, please God." Kate, my heart, if you'd like to go, go, and I'll have supper all ready for you when you come back."

"Yes, do come, Kate. I have a tremendous piece of news to tell you. No, it doesn't concern you or me, seeing a look of expectancy steal into her eyes."

"Then I am sure I know your news already," she cried, clapping her hands softly together. "It is that Jamie Tulloch is going to marry Miss Golding?"

"How do you know?" asked Travers in great surprise.

"Because the bride-elect was here yesterday, and told the whole tale with many particulars. Really, Jamie is in great luck for Miss Golding is a nice kind-hearted girl, and it she does believe in the power of wealth, why, she will be all the more in sympathy with her future husband."

"Yes, there will be a delightful unanimity of feeling on that point. But, let us be going."

"I am afraid it is rather late. We have our supper about seven, you know, and believe me—"

"Oh! nonsense; we have three hours, and we haven't had an 'outing' for ages. Not since the moonlight garden party. Oh, that was delightful!"

The color came slowly to Kate's face; and she looked away to the window.

"I was going to say, when you interrupted me so rudely, that I could not go out. I promised Madame la Rose to wait here, in case a French gentleman should call. She is in hopes of an engagement to teach his son English in the evening. She is only engaged for the morning hours now. She has gone to try and see him now, but he may call here; so I am on guard, you see."

"This was said lightly; yet Travers' keen ear detected an undertone of embarrassment; and he thought, 'She does not like to be alone with me. I must not press her.'"

"You should not commit yourself in this way, Kate. It is a pity to lose so fine a day, and now you will be obliged to entertain me all the afternoon—no light task, but I am not going to make room for the Frenchman."

"Faith, it's easy to forget how time goes, with a pleasant fellow like yourself," said Carey, from his armchair. "You sit down, and tell me poor outsiders some of the latest political gossip, and any other you like."

Kate drew a low wicker chair to the open window. The sun had gone away eastward, and the sweet soft air came in from the grassy wilderness below. Travers opened his budget, repeating many canards and some fairly true reports; finally, after a pause, he resumed, "I fancy after all I am fated to go to Africa."

"Bless my soul, Travers, you don't say so!"

"Yes, I thought I had finished the matter when I refused Sir Edward Vance's invitation to visit him; but to my surprise, when I thought he was in Yorkshire, he was the first person I ran up against in Torquay. We had a long palaver, and I have promised to meet him and some of the directors. The expedition is in the hands of a board of directors now at Southampton. And Travers proceeded to recapitulate some of Sir Edward's arguments. Carey listened with profound interest, putting many questions.

"It promises well," he exclaimed at length. "I wish I were a young fellow; begad, I'd like nothing better than to go with you, Travers, my boy."

"And a capital comrade you would make, sir. Your spirit and humor would keep the camp alive."

"It will be rather dangerous—the exploration part, I mean," said Kate, breaking silence for the first time.

"Not more than any hunting expedition usually is. The natives are not such fighting men as those of other parts; at least so we are assured, and I believe it. I have hunted over some of the country; that is one reason why they want me to join them."

"Here—here's half a column, no a column and a half, faith, all about the 'Expedition to the southeastern country bordering the Zambesi,' cried Carey, who had been scanning the paper. "Read it to me, will you, like a good fellow; my eyes are rather dim today."

And Travers read aloud, rather slowly and monotonously Kate thought. His voice dropped lower, and presently he stopped.

Carey slept sound and peacefully. Travers rose softly, and brought his chair close to where Kate sat partly sheltered by the window curtain.

Both were silent for some minutes. Then Travers said in a low tone, "You see I have taken your advice."

"Is it not accident rather than any advice that has actuated you, Dick?"

He thought her voice was not quite steady, and admonished himself 'not to be a fool.'

"Accident had a good deal to do with it certainly, but had not your words stirred in my ears, backing up accident, I might have again refused Sir Edward, and that would have been final."

"I am so glad you did not refuse. You will be glad, too, some day, I am sure."

"I am anything but glad today. I—I am awfully down at the prospect of leaving you—you all, I mean. I have grown accustomed to look to you for the only bit of home life I have ever known."

"It is a very poor little bit," said Kate, gently.

"A very sweet little bit, only not half enough to satisfy my appetite for its sweetness. You'll miss me? I am conceited enough to believe that, and will not even have Jamie Tulloch to supply my place!"

Kate laughed low and soft. "No, but we intend to be great friends with Mrs. Jamie, if she will only curb her ravishing propensities a little. Miss you Dick? I should think we shall. But you must write to us and tell us your adventures. Your letters will be most exciting. It is very wise of you to make up your mind and go. I am quite pleased with you."

"I am not gone yet," he returned, moodily. "I must know a little more before I have a small certainty for a big uncertainty."

"But would not Lord Balmuir promise to take you back to—"

"If I do not make a real success of this business, Kate, I will never return."

"Never return, Dick?" she exclaimed.

"That is a rash resolution."

"Nevertheless it is mine. If I join Garston, I shall adopt Africa either as somebody or nobody!"

"Do you mean to say we are never to see you again?"

"Not exactly. If I make money, if I gain a good position, I shall revisit London now and then. If not, well, I shall go under, and you still advise me to risk it!"

There was a slight pause, then Kate said very quietly and firmly, "I do. You ought to be something more than a private secretary. If you were quite independent in money matters, it would be different. You might go into Parliament, and be, oh! anything. As it is, why it is high time to begin to make a fortune, or a reputation."

"And if I return, I shall find you the wife of some citizen of credit and renown. What a worldly-wise little woman you have grown!"

"I must be worldly-wise. So depend upon it, Dick, only a citizen of 'credit' shall have the honour of an alliance with this broken-down family. Do not trouble about us. I fancy we shall float, and if you care to hear I shall keep you informed of our upward and onward progress. Believe me—"

Travers listened eagerly for what was to follow, but at that interesting moment Madame la Rose walked in, and Mr. Carey roused up.

Madame looked bright and elated. She had been fortunate. She had met "Monsieur" just as he was leaving his house, but such a pretty house, on Campden Hill. They had had a long conference, and finally agreed for a lesson every evening at seven—not a very convenient hour. But what would you! people earnestly seeking could not choose, etc., etc., etc.

Mr. Carey, thoroughly roused up, listened to these details with much interest, and Travers, though politely attentive, devoutly wished the speaker at the bottom of any sea. Red or Black, before she came in to arrest Kate's words.

It was no stay on when he hadn't a chance of speaking alone with his cousin; so after describing Mrs. Hume's wedding and talking a little on various subjects he took leave, pleading an engagement of some importance as his excuse for not staying to supper.

Travers thought much and deeply of this interview as he sped seawards to keep his engagement with Sir Edward Vance.

He was half ashamed to think that a mere girl, fifteen or sixteen years his junior, had more prudence and self-control than himself. She was right, of course, still it wounded his 'amour propre.' He sometimes thought that she returned his affection, but if she did she would never have concealed it so well. After all he had no right to fancy the existence of any reciprocity on her side. He was rather too old for her, and what was there about him to attract the fancy of a bright young creature. It was better so he told himself. God forbid that he should cause any pain or anxiety to her true heart. For true, he would always believe to be, even if she made a mercenary marriage. That would only be for the sake of her people. She had a remarkable amount of courage and spirit. She puzzled him—he did not always understand her. She was curiously mature in spite of her fresh youthfulness, and in spite of their disparity of age he had a profound respect for her natural sense and mother wit. Then her image came vividly before him. How charming her irregular beauty, that sweet soft mouth—which could smile scornfully as well as tenderly—the large speaking eyes—the long lashes which so often hid them from him when he most wanted to read their expression. Yes, it was wiser for him to go away and leave her quite free to follow her destiny—she wished him to go—really wished it. Perhaps she divined the true state of the case—and wanted to save him as well as herself possible suffering. Well so be it. Carey was surely safe for a couple of years at any rate, and by that time, if he was going to succeed, he would have succeeded or see success at hand. By that time Carey would probably be married, in which case he would never return to England, but do the best he could with his life in the new country he was about to try. Ah! in spite of this wise resolution, how his heart's senses ached for Kate, with all the intensity of a man's first love, coming at the period of his fullest strength and development.

Travers found on careful examination that the new company which had finally organised the expedition he had been asked to join seemed sound and solvent. They were also more favoured by Government than their numerous successors of the present day, being the first of this kind comparatively common. He, therefore, agreed to accept the appointment offered to him, much to Sir Edward Vance's gratification. The old gentleman carried him off to his place in Yorkshire, from whence he wrote to announce his decision to Mr. Carey.

The answer was full of kindly concern at the prospect of losing him, but foretold great things for his future. But the girls added words of warm good wishes. This did not satisfy Travers.

Kate might have written a whole letter herself. When he had reached Glendaroch, Lord Balmuir's place, he would write what would come as a reply.

The departure of the party was fixed for the first week of September, and Travers had promised Lord Balmuir as long a visit as he could manage before returning to town to get his outfit. Besides he could be of real use to his good friend and patron by inaugurating the gentleman he had chosen to replace his late secretary.

His letter to Kate, very carefully composed, remained unanswered, to his surprise, and even his indignation, for more than a fortnight. Meantime, Tulloch, whom he had forgotten, wrote reproachfully. Travers ought to have remembered that he (Tulloch) could not, with any sense of safety or comfort, present himself at Oakley Villas till he knew how the family had taken the news of his engagement to Miss Golding.

Travers hastened to set his mind at rest, and then started with Lord Balmuir to visit a Highland magnate, and stay for a few days' shooting, as the 12th was now close at hand.

Still there was no letter from Kate, and Travers let it be he had already bid her good-bye for ever.

There was a pleasant party assembled at Dalgarroch Castle, and Travers was a favored guest. His approaching departure was a source of interest to everyone, and the days went swiftly by to all save himself. He was consumed by longings for a sight of Kate Carey's fair face; to see what her eyes would say to him in the moment of parting, and it was with a sigh of relief he bid good-bye to his host, and accompanied Lord Balmuir to Glendaroch, on his way south.

Many letters awaited both. Some of them which had not been forwarded through some mistake were of rather ancient date. While Lord Balmuir was rowing the butler in no measured terms for this oversight, Travers retraced with his correspondence to his own room. He noticed two addressed in Carey's hand, and felt, or feared, that something must be wrong.

Examining the post-marks, he opened the earliest. It was nearly a fortnight old, and very brief.

"Dear Travers,—We have had a dreadful shock. You will be grieved to hear that poor Mr. Wincks is no more. He was found lying on the stairs the day before yesterday by the servants, about half-past six a.m. Life was quite extinct. It

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is supposed he had come down to fetch a book in the night, for the first volume of Mayne's work on 'Village Communities,' and his candlestick lay a few steps below, and the candle at the foot of the stairs. He was in his dressing-gown and slippers. His health was weak, and his heart all wrong. There will be a coroner's inquest, of course. My precious Kate is in the greatest grief; I fear it's a bad business for me. When do you come back to town—Yours ever,

"Robert Carey."

"What must they think of my leaving such a letter unanswered," exclaimed Travers, thrusting the letters into his pocket and hurrying down-stairs to seek his host, who was in the library.

"I must leave you immediately and try to catch the London train at Edinburgh to-night," cried Travers, excitedly.

"But you can't, my dear fellow. It's impossible. Take the first to-morrow to Glasgow. You'll be in time at seven p.m. No bad news, I hope?"

"Well, yes, rather. Let me see Bradshaw."

CHAPTER XVI.—DAYBREAK.

After a sleepless night Travers started early on his journey. Glendaroch was not on any of the leading lines which converge in London, and was rather difficult to escape from—a journey to or from Edinburgh or Glasgow was inevitable, whatever your destination.

Lord Balmuir parted from his ex-secretary with sincere regret, and assured him that he would back him in the future with all the Parliamentary interests he could command.

Travers, however, was far too absorbed in his own troubles and the renewal of his indecision to have much thought left for anything else; still he was momentarily gratified by this mark of regard, and with a hearty hand pressure the two men parted. How irremissable the journey appeared.

At the date of this true tale the distance between London and Edinburgh was effectively greater than at present, and when at last Travers reached his lodgings it was too late to visit Carey and his daughters.

"Mr. Carey called this afternoon, sir," said Travers' ex-valet and present landlord, when he had admitted his tenant, whose arrival took him by surprise. "He was here the day before yesterday also, and rather troubled at not hearing from you."

He wanted your address, sir, so I said I only knew Glendaroch. Then Mr. Carey remarked he had written to you there till he was tired, and could get no answer. I made bold to ask for the young ladies, sir, and he said they were as well as they could be."

"How did he seem himself?" asked Travers, who was longing to know all about his charges, as he considered the family.

"Well, sir, I never saw him look better." "How observant these kind of people are," thought Travers. "I shall find Carey wretchedly down on his luck, poor fellow. This has been an awful blow to him."

Before touching the dinner, or rather supper, hastily provided for him, Travers wrote a brief note to Carey explaining his silence, and saying he would call early on the following morning. This despatched to the post, he tried to eat and then to sleep, with small success.

It was impossible that he could put half the Southern Hemisphere between these helpless ones and himself, now in their time of trouble! Yet he was pledged to the party he had promised to join, and even if he could honorably break with them, he would be admitting himself. He could not expect Lord Balmuir to send away the secretary he had just engaged merely to suit his own convenience.

Amid these troubled reflections a note of joy would make itself heard as the idea flashed through the gloom of his thoughts, like lightning across a bank of dark clouds: "Whatever happens I shall see Kate to-morrow."

The morning came with wild gusts of wind and driving showers. It was an angry depressing day, and Travers thought the weather fitted the fortunes of his kinsfolk.

At last it was time to start. "There is little or no chance of finding Kate alone," he mused, as he looked out for a hansom. "Poor Carey does not leave early for the office nowadays! Even if I did, the determined darling would have her batteries prepared to keep me at bay. But I must speak. We must come to an understanding if I am to help them effectually: and they want help."

He was interrupted by a voice he knew exclaiming, "Why, Travers, I was just coming to your place," and he turned, to find himself face to face with Tulloch.

"What! have you become so indolent in this London Capua, that you are not in the city at this hour?"

"Well, you see, there is not much doing now, and I have rather important business, as fast as I can. I want the honey-mooning done with before October, so that I can settle regularly to business by winter," said Tulloch, with a grin. "Glad you're back in town, Travers; poor old Carey has been wearying to see you. The death of Wincks has been a bad business for him. He came round to me with the news at once, and you never saw a fellow so broken down. I went to see them a day or two after and found him cheered up a bit. He had got a scheme for starting a great Irish Law Agency in London, and wanted me to advance the funds. I

soon quashed that. The daughters have twice his sense. I must say Kate is a first-rate girl, but between you and me, I don't think she has much heart. She didn't seem to mind my engagement in the least, and I don't think her indifference was put on."

"Ah! it would have been more flattering if she had a heart, and broke it for you, eh?" "What a cynical chap you are, Travers. God knows I wouldn't like to give her a moment's pain. I suppose you are going to see them?"

"Yes, I am on my way now, and a little behind time."

"All right, I take the hint. If you are going to get up any scheme for old Carey, I'll be glad to help, within certain limits, and so will Miss Golding, she is awfully taken with the whole lot of them—a trifle too much so in my mind. Good-bye for the present, oh, by-the-way, is it true you are going out to Africa?"

"I am not quite sure."

"If you are behind the scenes I wish you'd give me a straight tip as to the advisability of putting a thousand or two in it."

"I'll explain matters when we meet again," said Travers, hastily. "Hi, hansom!" and the next moment he was rolling rapidly towards Nottinghill.

Contrary to his expectation, Kate was alone. How delightfully familiar the homely room—its few ornaments—the writing table crowded with books and papers—seem to him, after his comparatively long absence. Kate herself looked pale and thoughtful, and seemed busy with letters or papers of some kind. How well her simple black frock became her, and how softly, beautifully white her throat looked against the black net frill which surrounded it.

"Ah! cousin Dick!" she cried, coming forward with both hands outstretched. Her eyes beaming 'welcome,' and a little tremulous smile quivering on her lips.

Travers caught her hands, kissed them, and pressed them to his heart. He cast prudence to winds, determined to risk everything.

"What—what can you have thought of my silence," he exclaimed.

"Oh, nothing—except that I felt quite sure you never had had papa's letter. I should much sooner doubt myself than you, Dick. The way in which she uttered his name was infinitely crushing."