

Captain Despard's

Dilemma.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

"It is usual to defer to the lady herself," replied Reginald, throwing his head back with a look of hauteur, "and, needless to say, I am quite prepared to resign my claim if she desires it."

"Really," stammered Maud, blushing deeply and looking prettier than ever when placed in such an embarrassing position. "I don't know what to say. I should be very pleased to go down to supper with either of you; but, Mr. Fenton, suppose I give you another dance later on. Won't that do?"

"Must do, I suppose," ungraciously turning on his heel as he spoke. "Mr. Fenton, indeed, when it's been 'Harry' all our lives up to now. You know how to flirt, Miss Maud, that's clear, but other people can play at that game, and it's well known that soldiers love and ride away, so take care of yourself; those eyes of his weren't made for the good of his soul, and he's an older hand at the business than you are, I guess."

Soon after this he went home, perfectly furious at her treatment of him, and swearing eternal vengeance on the cause of it.

His departure, however, was hailed with satisfaction by Maud who had no desire for his society, and who was enjoying herself more than she had ever done before.

"Do you know, Captain Despard," she said, "that this is my first ball, and in all probability my last one, too, for they are very rare occurrences in Somerville?"

"But you will not always live in Somerville," he answered, with a laugh. "In India where I have quartered for the last five years, there are balls almost every night of the year, which would be perfect had we only enough ladies."

"But, you see, I shall never benefit by their frequency," said Maud, rising to her feet with a stifled sigh. "I don't suppose that I shall ever see India again, although I was born there. Papa lived there for about twelve years, and he thinks no place equal to it."

"Oh!" began the captain eagerly, "stranger things have happened than your living in India."

"Maud," said the voice of Sybil just behind her at this juncture of affairs, "it is getting very late. Half the people have left already, and I think we ought to follow suit."

"Stay until the end," pleaded an eager voice in her ear. "Please, please don't go yet."

But, very reluctantly, Maud rose to her feet and obeyed the summons.

Sybil was quite right, she knew. It would not be quite good taste to remain until the very tag-end, seeing that their parents were both absent.

The next ten minutes all was confusion and hurry. Mrs. Montague suddenly pounced down on Captain Despard and dragged him off to attend to several ladies, who looked as if they felt themselves neglected.

"Give them tea—coffee—soup—anything!" she whispered; "only banish that aggrieved look from their faces. Let them go away with a pleasant send-off, even if they have been a bit dull during the evening."

And having a guilty feeling that for the last two hours he had done nothing but study his own enjoyment, Reginald threw himself so heartily into the breach that each individual member of the six neglected maidens went away with a fixed impression on her mind that Captain Despard was the most utterly charming man on the face of the earth, and that if only Fate had been kind enough to throw them together at the beginning, instead of the close of the evening, everything would have been very different, and perhaps ended in marriage bells.

And so the famous ball was over at last all too soon, as it seemed to everyone concerned, except the tired hostess, who was only too thankful there had been no fiasco.

Maud went to bed to dream of the handsome son of Mars who had so suddenly jumped into her life, as it were, never to be banished again—at last she had fallen in love, and in the privacy of her own room frankly confessed it to herself.

And Captain Despard paced his room all night, intoxicated with the rapture of a first grande passion, and determined to put his fate to the test without further delay.

CHAPTER III.

"A telegram for you, miss," said the servant, putting her head in at the door on the door on the morning following the ball and the boy's waiting for an answer."

"From Mentone! What can have happened? Oh, Sybil! be quick! be quick!"

"Your mother down with influenza," ran the telegram. "Better come and nurse her. I am all right—A. Browne."

"I am sure she must be very ill to have us telegraphed for," said Sybil, pale with agitation. "Just send off a reply, Maud, saying we will catch next train—where is a time-table?—I am trembling too much to write a line."

"I've filled up the form, and the boy says it will go at once," said Maud, who, in moments of emergency, seemed to keep calmer than her sister, "and now I'll just pack her portmanteaux. There is a train at eleven; we can catch that. I suppose mother caught the influenza before leaving home. I noticed how worn and ill she looked, but hoped the change would do her good. No doubt

she has been worried and anxious about papa. How pale you are, dear!"

"I cannot be more destitute of color than you," replied Sybil, "for you are more like a ghost than a creature of flesh and blood."

Then for half-an-hour all was wild confusion.

A hastily summoned cab conveyed them to the station, and, to their relief they succeeded in catching the up-express, and plunged into the first vacant carriage.

Ere it was out of the station, they discovered that, by some strange trick of fate Lucy and Mary Brown were their vis-a-vis and ere long they entered into conversation together and exchanged confidences.

"I do sympathize so much with you, dears," said Mary, in her low, sweet sad voice. "Life seems very sad and dreary when we leave childhood behind; joy and sorrow seem to tread so swiftly on each other's heels. Only last night we were all so happy and merry together, and now a cloud has fallen on you which makes the former gaiety seem distasteful even to remembrance."

"That is just what I feel," cried Maud eagerly. "I—I was so happy last night that I felt it could not continue. It seemed unnatural, unreal. Have you ever felt like that?"

"Often in the past," replied Mary softly, "before my parents died, and before real sorrow clouded my life. Ecstatic happiness only belongs to extreme youth; every year after twenty is past bring its share of regret."

"Mary is a perfect wet blanket," said Lucy half-indignantly, "and I'm sure no one could have had a more enjoyable evening than fell to her share at the ball. Not one vacant place on her programme, a bouquet fit for a queen to carry, and the pick of the room so far as partners were concerned. To hear her talk today one would almost think she had been amongst the wall-flowers, and was suffering under a sense of neglect."

"Not so," said Maud, with a grateful glance at the other sister; "only, seeing how unhappy we are, she sinks her own triumphs in our trouble. I quite understand and appreciate her sympathy. But isn't it a strange coincidence that we are all leaving Somerville to-day—by the same train, in the same carriage. Martin Square must feel quite deserted. I hope sincerely though, that the cause of your absence is a pleasanter one than that which summoned us away so suddenly."

"Fortunately, yes," replied Lucy, with a smile. "I am going to visit some friends at Chislehurst, and Mary, after breaking her journey in town for a couple of days, is going on to some relatives at Tunbridge Wells."

"We should have started a week ago, but remained expressly for the ball," explained Mary.

And then they continued chatting together until the train reached Paddington, when they separated, feeling that, in the space occupied by that short journey, they had grown to know and understand each other far better than during all the two years they had resided side by side as neighbors in Martin Square.

"How pretty and how sweet the eldest one is!" cried Maud, when they had made their adieux, and each pair had started on their respective ways, "and how stupid it does seem when you come to think of it, for people, at the end of the nineteenth century, to live next door to others, and meet them daily for two years, and pretend not to even know who they are when they do meet; yet that is what everyone does pretend in Somerville."

"And in nine out of ten of all provincial towns; Somerville does not stand alone in its foolishness," retorted Sybil, "and even that is not quite so absurd as at some of the stations papa was at—don't you remember?—places where the cavalry looked down on infantry officers, and both were inclined to patronize the surgeon and the chaplain. What we want is another Thackeray to give us a new and up-to-date edition of the book of snobs."

"Yes; and the funniest part of all is that the very people who most appreciate that book never see that it applies to them at all," agreed Maud. "Everyone who looks down on them is a snob, but it is quite a different matter when they look down on anyone else."

Then anxiety about their mother occupied their attention, and, during the rest of their long journey, they spoke of little else than their hopes and fears regarding her.

"I tried not to alarm you my dears," said the major, when he met them at the station, "but she is really very ill—temperature fearfully high, and the pulse has been alarming. But the doctor says the fever is abating, and all we can do is to give her every care and attention, and hope for the best."

Many times during the anxious days which followed did Maud reflect on Mary Brown's words, "Joy and sorrow tread swiftly on each other's heels."

How true it had proved in her own case! The night of the ball was the happiest time of her life, and the day which succeeded it the saddest.

"He will have left Somerville or forgotten me before we return," she thought; yet never once did a selfish regret pass her lips.

Hers was a nature so sweet and true-hearted that both joys and sorrows only

pointed silently upwards; and young as she was in years and experience, she had already grasped the great lesson of life.

CHAPTER IV.

"Never put off until to-morrow what you can do to-day," exclaimed Captain Despard gaily, as he descended the staircase on his way to breakfast the morning following the ball. "Wish I had acted on that rule last night, and then I should not be on thorns to-day—of doubt, anyhow—for my case would have been settled one way or the other, and I should either be in Paradise or in Hades. How I hate suspense! And she was so sweet and kind at the ball, I really don't think she would have refused me."

"But I'll strike while the iron is hot, and propose to day. My first call at Martin Square and possibly my last."

"If she rejects my offer I shall leave Somerville to-night; if she accepts I shall be the happiest man in Christendom."

"They'll all know what it means directly I am announced. I shouldn't call during their parents' absence unless it was to lay myself at someone's feet."

"The sisters seem nice girls. I wonder whether they will clear out and give me the opportunity I desire, or whether they'll hang on, and thus defer the critical moment for another long day. Never mind, I'll risk it. Sooner or later my chance will come, and I'll seize it without hesitating."

Little did he dream of the sore disappointment which awaited him, however, and never had been in brighter spirits, or looked handsomer than he did as he mounted the steps of 15, Martin Square that afternoon and asked for the Misses Brown.

"Out of town, sir," was the prompt reply, and he felt as if someone had thrown a dash of cold water in the face.

Was it a bona fide excuse, or—but no, that would be too absurd.

"I will leave my card," he said slowly.

"By the by, are they all away?"

"Yes, sir; no one at home. Would have started before only waited for the ball," replied the servant, suppressing a grin at the evident disappointment on the face of Miss Mary's beau, as they called him, having long ago discovered him to be the sender of the exquisite flowers which occasionally came to that young lady.

"I wished to see one of them very much," he said, lamely, after a pause, "or if that is impossible, I should like their address. Oh, I—I conclude that there is only one Miss—Miss M. Brown—flushing deeply as he spoke, and becoming so confused that the servant giggled audibly, as she replied—

"Only one, sir, and all letters is to be forwarded on from here. We were not to give their address to anyone without permission; but I'll take good care, sir, as she gets it, so be you choose to write."

"Ah! thank you," he said, slipping a sovereign into her willing hand. "It is a matter of great importance, and I will write tonight."

A vague feeling of depression seized his mind, engendered of disappointment, as he returned to his hotel.

He had been wrought up to fever heat only for this—more delay, more suspense. Possibly she had never thought seriously of him for a moment, and it was a case of "out of sight out of mind."

"Strange that she made no allusion whatever to their intention of leaving Somerville," he mused; "yet the servant distinctly said that they had only waited for the ball, or would have left some time back."

Was it only an oversight—a forgetfulness on her part—or intentional? Love is ever very critical and jealous in all points touching itself, and ere long poor Reginald felt hopes fall to zero, and was just as confident now of being refused as he had been hopeful before of being accepted.

It seemed so very unlikely that she would go right away, without a word, if she really cared or thought seriously about him, and when he tried to calmly review his acquaintance with her, he grew pale at the ridiculously small grounds he had for his pretensions to her hand.

A chance meeting at Mrs. Montague's—a few bows and smiles in the street on coming out of church, a few handshakes, and the grand climax of the ball—how foolish, how trivial it all seemed when dragged out for serious consideration.

"But love is not measured by days, or words, or ordinary standards," he cried resolutely, "and at any rate I'll let her see what my intentions are, and end this wretched suspense. Why, another week of it would turn my hair grey, and add ten years to my age. So here goes."

Saying which he drew forth pen, ink, and paper, and sat down to what was decidedly the most difficult task he had ever attempted.

"DEAR MISS BROWN,—Having failed in my attempt to obtain a private interview with you, and learning that you have left Somerville for an indefinite period, I hope you will pardon the apparent liberty I take in presuming to write to you, which I should not dream of doing unless I could offer as my excuse that my whole happiness depends upon it, and that in your hands lies my destiny, my entire future life."

"I love you deeply, truly, sincerely! The instant my eyes saw your face I realized that for me the world only held one woman—yourself; and hurried as my wooing has hitherto been, yet surely something in my tone and manner must have given you an inkling of what was passing in my heart."

"I came to Somerville on a flying visit, light of heart and fancy free. I met you, and in an instant the whole current of my life was altered."

"I could not tear myself away, so I took up my station at the hotel, and earnestly tried to see more of you, to gain an entrance into your home, and show you what my feelings were."

"As you know, I signally failed. I met you nowhere: I began to think you did not desire my acquaintance, when sudden-

ly the ball changed the aspect of affairs, and gave me some opportunity for pressing my attentions upon you."

"You did not entirely discourage me, and so I felt full of confidence and hope."

"I called at Martin Square today to ask you to be my wife, and I cannot describe to you the bitter disappointment I experienced upon learning that you had left home."

"I decided to write, to tell my love, and throw myself upon your compassion. Even if you do not care for me now, yet if you care for no other man more than myself, will you not trust to my great love to win a return in time? Until I receive your reply, I shall be in an agony of suspense; so pray take pity on me, and send me a speedy answer."

"Believe me to be

"Ever yours devotedly,

"REGINALD DESPARD."

Then he duly sealed and directed it to "Miss M. Brown, Martin Square," carried it with his own hand, and slipped it into the letter box at No. 15, then tried to prepare himself for the worst.

What the worst would be he half dreaded to contemplate.

It was two days before he received the reply, which ran as follows:

"Montague Square, London."

"Dear Captain Despard,—Your letter was forwarded to me from Martin Square, Somerville, and I only received it this morning, which will account for your not receiving an immediate reply to your very kind and unexpected proposal, for which I really assure you I was totally unprepared, and to which I scarcely know how to answer."

"This will not surprise you, seeing how little we really know of one another. I think we have hardly met, certainly not spoken together, more than half a dozen times in our lives. Marriage is such a serious affair, that in my opinion, it is sacred, and ought not to be discussed lightly or entered upon without grave consideration."

"Are you sure of your own feelings sure that when you say I am the only woman in the world for you, in years to come some other face may not be fairer and dearer to you than mine? Think well before you take the final step. To remain unwooded, unweid, is no disgrace; but to be sought, then thrown aside, to a woman is anguish indeed."

"To conclude, I admit that I have always enjoyed your society, and if, as you say in your letter—after seriously considering every word I have written—you still think it would add to your happiness to marry me, I promise you that I will become your wife whenever you wish me to do so."

"I leave London tomorrow, and proceed to Tunbridge Wells to stay with the uncle whose address I enclose."

"Remember that you are as free as air, that I shall not consider you in any way bound to me, unless I hear from you again."

"If you come to my uncle's house, I shall know that you still desire to marry me, and shall be very pleased to receive you on that understanding."

"With kindest regards,

"Believe me to be

"Yours very truly,

"M. BROWN."

"What a sweet, womanly letter!" cried Reginald, in the highest state of rapture, as he kissed it in passionate affection. "How free from all vanity and undue conceit, surprised that her attractions are sufficient to win any man's notice, more anxious on my account than her own. Willing to yield if I really continue my courtship, but reluctant to display any undue haste to enter into a marriage engagement."

"Sweet one! I will speedily convince you that my love is steadfast, sincere, enduring and yours only."

So he wrote a second letter, more passionate and ardent than the first, eagerly reiterating his offer, accepting the terms she proposed, namely, that, if he still desired to marry her, he was to follow her down to Tunbridge Wells, and be introduced to her relatives as her fiancé.

He told her to expect him on the following day; then, having duly signed, sealed, and posted the letter, he proceeded up to town, to make his own preparations for the interview.

First and foremost, of course, came the choosing of the engagement ring—a magnificent half-hoop diamond circle, of almost fabulous price—which he immediately forwarded to her, and some few other trifles he longed to give her, for Reginald Despard was the soul of generosity, and fortunately rich enough to indulge his fancy.

Never had he felt so dissatisfied with his own appearance, or taken more time over his toilet; but he finally arranged everything just in time to catch the train to Tunbridge, to which place he set off in pleased, eager anticipation of what was about to happen.

He little foresaw what would happen.

If he had had but an inkling of the truth he would not have proceeded a step farther but would have taken the next train back.

On arriving, he sent his valet on to the hotel with his luggage, and proceeded himself straight to the residence of Miss Brown's uncle, and sent in his name to her.

How impatiently he awaited her appear-



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ance!

He was shown into a cosy little room, and presently the door opened softly to admit someone.

He made one eager step forward, and uttered a half exclamation of delight before he realized that it was not his darling—not Maud, for a sight of whose face his eyes were hungrily craving—but the person he had always believed to be her elder sister.

Hiding his disappointment, which was considerable, he inquired politely after her health, remarked upon the weather, and, trying not to look embarrassed, asked if her sister was quite well?

"Quite well, thank you," replied Miss Brown. "At present she is staying with some friends in Manchester, and was so surprised to hear of my engagement. But I have not yet thanked you for the beautiful ring you sent me; it is a perfect fit."

So saying, she held up her hand for his inspection, on which Reginald saw, to his bewildered horror, the ring he had meant for Maud.

He could only gaze, and gaze, utterly unable to say a word.

"I am so glad you were able to come," Miss Brown went on, "my aunt and cousins are quite curious about you, and I have been perfectly overwhelmed with questions. But you look very tired; won't you come into the dining room, and join us at dinner?—the gong has just sounded."

"No, thank you," muttered Reginald, sick with misery; "I don't feel quite up to the mark, and must ask to be excused this evening. I—I will call to-morrow without fail, I promise you."

"I hope that you are not going to be ill," said Miss Brown in a half alarmed tone; "you look like a corpse. Do let me ring for some brandy."

"No, don't trouble, don't disturb anyone, I shall be all right presently. I will go to my hotel now, if you don't mind," backing out of the room as he spoke, and quite forgetting to shake hands. "Good-night."

"Good night, Captain Despard," replied Miss Brown, thoroughly puzzled and alarmed. "If you are not better to-morrow you must see a doctor."

"I will, if there should really be any need to do so," he assured her.

And then he was gone.

Mary looked still more perplexed. "I had no idea he was so delicate," she said to herself when he had disappeared. "How disappointed they will all be not to see him tonight. I really should not like to marry an invalid but then he is so handsome. When I entered the room he looked splendid; but he's the funniest lover I ever heard of. Why, he did not even shake hands with me, let alone anything else."

Meanwhile, the unhappy subject of these remarks returned to his hotel, almost in a state of frenzy.

"Heaven help me!" he cried in agony. "What can I do? Oh, Maud, my darling, if you only knew what I am suffering! How on earth have I got in such a mess, and how can I ever get out of it? I feel I shall become demented if this goes on."

Night brought no relief to his mind, but by morning he decided that, for the present anyhow, things would have to remain as they were.

There was really nothing else that could, as a gentleman, do, under the very distressing circumstances.

He was far too honorable to expose Miss Brown to ridicule, as she clearly was in no fault, and he acknowledged to himself, with a bitter groan, that the entire mistake arose from his own stupidity, and that he only was to blame.

"Something may turn up yet," he said to himself, as he walked up the Rectory steps the next day. "I'm afraid I shall prove a sorry lover; but I can't sham an affection I don't feel, and, thank the gods, the lady doesn't seem demonstrative."

Nevertheless, in spite of his thus trying to comfort himself, he was feeling supremely miserable.

Upon entering the house he was shown into the drawing room, where Miss Brown and her aunt were awaiting him with considerable curiosity.

After the first awkwardness was over, he

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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