

The Secret of a Picture.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER I POOR LITTLE GIRL.

'You think of nothing but pleasure, Eola.' And the speaker's tone held a stern severity. 'No, you cannot go skating to-day; those covers for the drawing room must be finished before the dinner party. I told you so a week ago; but you—'

'Have worked hard, mamma; indeed I have. You have no idea how much work there is in those chintz covers, with their frills, and I do think Blanche and Julia might help a little. It is they who have the pleasure, I am sure, not I.'

'Eola, have you forgotten?'

Mrs. Caxton lowered her voice, but she made it very terrible.

Eola looked pitiously into the hard face and then her own soft, flower like one quivered a rush of tears blinded the sweet blue eyes; the girl clasped her hands in a way that told of extreme agitation.

'Oh! let me go—away,' she faltered.

'Let me go and earn my own living somewhere, anywhere, anyhow. I do not want to be a burden upon you.'

'You do not wish to recompense me for the burden you have been,' Mrs. Caxton corrected severely. 'Talk no more high-flown nonsense, Eola; show a little gratitude. If I were in your place I should think nothing too much to do in return for all I had received.' Then with a lofty condescension: 'You are making those covers fit very nicely; they must be all completed by the night of the party, and I think the room will look extremely well.'

Eola sighed, dried her pretty eyes and picked up her sewing.

It was a lovely day out-of-door, crisp and bright, sunny and frosty.

The ice was just bearing well, it was in splendid condition, and the lake at Highfields, the Earl of Dartrey's place, would be crowded with happy, healthy, merry skaters.

Eola pictured it all; and she could skate so well, so much better than either Julia or Blanche, for she had learned to skim over the ice as a child in Canada, and her lithe slim figure was light and airy as a bird's, while the two elder Miss Caxtons were tailor made and stiff, awkward on skates, nervous and insecure.

Yet, all the same, Eola saw Blanche and Julia start for the lake, beautifully attired in blue cloth, with sable furs and muffs, the newest things in skates hanging on their arms, and a joyous anticipation brightening their somewhat common faces.

Eola heard Blanche say to Julia—

'My dear, he is sure to be there—most likely we shall get an introduction.'

Mrs. Caxton went out also, magnificent in brocade and sealings; and poor Eola—poor, little Cinderella—sat alone and stitched, until the needle seemed to prick her heart, it was all so dreary and so lonely.

It was not the sewing she minded, but, in this house, the sensitive, warm hearted girl had no love nor sympathy.

At school she had had friends and happiness; but now Blanche and Julia seemed to think it their mission to snub her, and Mrs. Caxton was always hard upon her youngest daughter.

Eola only dimly remembered the father who used to pet her and be kind after a clumsy fashion.

He had died so many years ago.

'Miss Eola—the cook put her head in at the door without ceremony—Dawson has never sent that cream and I must have it for the blanc-mange. Would you just run and fetch it for me, miss?'

Cook tendered a jug in the most off-hand manner, but Eola took it, without resentment.

She was used to doing the errands of the household, and, just now, a breath of fresh air seemed good at any price.

'A blow will do you good,' said cook, in a friendly tone. 'You look pale shut up here, but la! you are making those covers nice.'

Eola spurned the stiff hard chintz with her foot, then she lugged, ran upstairs, put on a hat and jacket of sufficient shabbiness, and went down to the milk shop.

The air did do her good, and yet, as she waded at the milk shop, she heard the ring of skates on the distant ice, and a pensive disappointment came over her.

She was only eighteen.

The tears blinded her as she ran home, and the end of it was, that she slipped upon a bit of ice just outside her own gate and fell, the jug breaking into pieces and the cream bathing her hands.

It seemed the last straw, and Eola—poor childish Eola!—dissolved into tears,

sitting huddled upon the hard ground in a pathetic heap.

'Oh, what a dreary world it is!' she sobbed.

'Poor little girl,' said a deep and a very delightful voice, but oh, the ignominy of it!—it was the voice of a man. 'Has the world used you so very ill? What is the matter? What can we do?'

Eola scrambled to her feet.

She had no dignity left, or her hair was all ruffled, her hat awry with her fall, her pretty eyes red, and her face wet with tears.

But she tried to conjure up an awful presence which should annihilate this most impertinent stranger.

'Nothing!'

Briefly she answered him, in a lofty, yet wistful, a quivering voice—

'But, my dear—my dear child, you are crying. Ah, I see; you fell, and the milk was spilled! Now tell me what I can do.'

'It was cream, and not milk, and a stranger can do nothing.'

She spoke in withering accents.

But still there was that tremor about the rosy lips, and her sweet little face looked forlorn.

'Cream! That makes it a thousand times worse. But you have no right to say that I can do nothing. You have no idea what a man of resources I am. For instance, if you will wait quietly here, I will engage to bring you as within five minutes much cream as you can possibly want.'

'You are a stranger,' cried Eola.

She knew not what else to say.

The dusk was falling all around them, and, though she looked up shyly into the face so far above her own—the audacious stranger was a very tall man—she could not see much of it.

What she did see looked very handsome, and the man was wearing a coat with a sable collar and cuffs.

These things made his presumption worse.

'I am afraid I am a stranger at present,' that musical voice said, regretfully; 'but there is no reason, that I can see, why I should continue to be one. You live in Stretton?'

'I live here—here,' said Eola, clutching the gate-post.

'Then I shall know exactly where to bring the cream. Go indoors it is so bitterly cold. But why are you not on the ice with all the rest of the world—the world of Stretton?'

'I—I—the tears were very near again—'I was not able to go today.'

'You had this cream on your mind? You will be on the lake tomorrow?'

'I—I am not sure.' Was it possible that this distinguished stranger was seeking to make an appointment? Eola had heard of such things; she turned her head and instead of cold, but the superb majesty with which she drew up her head and faced him was like nothing the stranger had ever seen before; it fascinated him. 'I beg you to remember that, if we should meet, sir, on ice or land—' with a thought to grasp all possibilities.

'Exactly, ice or land!'—encouragingly.

'We are entire strangers.'

'But not for always. You have no thought beyond the immediate present. I shall get an introduction. Do you see?' he said bending down and smiling right into her eyes.

'I don't think that is very probable,' she replied, still stiffly; but there was a note in her voice very like hope.

'Cedar Cottage,' said the audacious stranger, making a note of the address; and then he bowed very low and went his way.

Eola had but just re-threaded her needle and re-pricked her finger, when cook put her head again within the door.

'Miss Eola, her is a gentleman—a real gentleman, it I ever see one—waiting to speak to you, and he has got the biggest can of cream—carrying it himself—that ever I did see.'

'Oh, this is intolerable!' cried Miss Eola Caxton.

She sprang up thimble, needle, and all and marched to the front door.

The hall gas was lit; and now her disfiguring hat was laid aside and her golden-brown hair was smoothed back—it always rippled a little wilfully—one saw what a sweetly pretty girl she was.

The stranger seemed to see it clearly.

'Take away that cream!' cried Eola, in ringing notes of command. 'Take it away I say, every drop!'

'Ls! miss,' from cook in back ground, 'I must have some. Miss Blanche will be that furious if she don't get her blanc-mange. And it will be hard on you miss; you know that,' in audible sotto voce.

'Miss Blanche Caxton?' interrogatively put in the gentleman with the can.

'The same, sir,' from cook; and gets into a regular tantrum, she do, if she don't have just what she wants, and will scold Miss Eola here terrible.'

'Cook!' cried Eola, warningly, but no one heeded.

'Take the cream, cook,' said the man, handing it into her willing grasp. 'I really can't carry it any further. I was introduced to Miss Blanche on the ice this afternoon, so it is quite in order. And you—' he bent towards Eola, and she saw his smile and its charm now as distinctly as he saw her lovely violet eyes and flower-like face—'you will come on the lake tomorrow, won't you?'

'If I can,' she faltered, in spite of herself.

He smiled again—bowed again with that courtly grace, like nothing she had ever seen of late; and yet it seemed to recall

sweet memories of long ago and then he went away.

Blanche and Julia Caxton returned from the ice in great spirits.

'Oh he is too charming!' Blanche said.

'That smile of his! and his bow—it is a dream of high-bred courtesy. And the way he talks—that satirical, clever, rather bewildering way—is not it fascinating?'

'And the way he looks at you when he speaks!' Julia said, with a simper, upon which Blanche looked at her sister rather sharply.

'Who is this Admirable Crichton?' Eola asked, with a faint interest.

She was stitching again.

'Lord Bellevue. Such a dear he is staying at Highfields. He was the catch of the season in London last year. Everybody was after him, old and young.'

'And no one caught him.' Julia simpered again. 'He is coming to dine here on Thursday. You will have the chairs done Eola? And couldn't you alter the lace on my rose-colored silk, dear? I think black, instead of white, would be more becoming. He said today—another simper—'how pretty pink and black were. If you could alter it for me, Eola, and get it nicely done—'

'No; I cannot,' Eola stood up in her desperation. 'I am going skating to-morrow, and I cannot do one thing beyond these covers.'

'My dear, if your sister wants her dress altered, you will, of course, be glad to do it.' Mrs. Caxton, with a voice as hard and smooth as steel, put in; and Eola, with a sudden memory, gulped down the sob in her throat and said nothing more.

CHAPTER II. ON THE ICE AND BENEATH IT.

How Eola hated the name of Lord Bellevue before the two Miss Caxtons went off, in their blue costumes to the ice on the following day!

She heard of nothing else.

When she was left alone, with the rose-colored silk and the yards of lace, black and white, and no fresh air to cure the headache which tears and overwork had given her, she thought of the knight of the cream, and wondered if he were looking for her upon the crowded lake, or if he had quite forgotten by now the little episode of yesterday.

Oh! of course, he had forgotten.

After a whole afternoon of sewing Eola's head grew so bad that the rose silk swam before her eyes.

She lifted them to the window, and a daring thought came to her.

Her mother and sisters would not be back until dinner-time.

'They were going to an "At Home" from the lake.'

The daring idea suggested itself to Cinderella that she would run to the lake, and have a few turns on her skates before it became quite dark.

The idea carried her on its wings, and she reached the sheet of frozen water in breathless haste.

How delicious the clear, glassy expanse of ice looked beneath the very faint light of the stars which were all coming out!

But alas! no one seemed skating there now—Eola had met crowds coming away; the lake lay quiet and deserted.

The girl hesitated, then she ice lured her, and she saw one figure, tall and dark and spectral, glowing on the furthest part of the lake.

'It is quite safe,' said Eola, encouraging herself. 'Now I am here, I must have one turn.'

Her skates were Acme and went on with a touch; in a second she too, was shadowy, spectral figure gliding across the frozen water.

Oh, how delicious!

Her headache went as by a musician's touch; her spirits revived.

The exhilarating motion and the bracing air made her a new girl.

Swifter, faster, more daring, more graceful, more perfectly at home on the ice than any woman who had been there that day, pretty Eola flew on and on darting, circling, wheeling, flying.

Oh! life was worth living now.

She grew accustomed to the semi-darkness, and she entirely forgot her fellow skater.

She fancied, indeed, that he had retired from the ice, until, as she paused for breath after some most intricate figures cut, she heard a voice at her elbow, a voice which made her heart beat more rapidly—

'You have come at last, and how beautifully you skate!'

'I have done me great good, too. I never saw anyone twine skate as you do.'

He knelt down on the ice, and took off her skates.

She had the prettiest little feet, albeit her boots left something to be desired; then he said—

'You will let me see you home?' and she replied—

'Certainly not!'

Whereupon they bowed and parted, and Eola sang to herself, as she tripped along the path by the side of the ice; but, ere she left the lake, she turned, to give one last look, and she saw her late companion striking out for a different part of the ice—a dark, deep water, beneath the trees—and, with a sudden gasp, the girl said—

'They broke the ice there last year to give air to the fish!'

She turned, and ran back along the bank.

'Don't go there!' she cried, as loudly as she could; but even in the moment her voice rang out, the tall figure reached the dark ice under the trees, and in the next he had disappeared.

Then came a shout, muffled and not repeated, from that place where one saw nothing.

Eola ran like the wind.

She had all her wits about her, and in an instant she remembered she had seen some planks, placed from the arbor in which people put on their skates to the ice to make a footway.

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She stood erect, a slim figure, in brown dress, jacket and hat; the shabbiness in this light was not perceptible, and the most costly clothes could not have made her face more lovely.

'Have you forgotten my words of yesterday?' she asked rather breathlessly.

'Not one of them.' He came nearer. I recollect every syllable you uttered.'

'This was disconcerting, and his smile even more so.'

But Eola rallied her forces.

'I have not the least idea who you are. You look quite respectable.'

He smiled again, and softly murmured—

'Thanks!'

'But, you see, we have never been introduced, and I could not—oh, I could not possibly talk to you on a place like this without—without—oh, you must know you were so kind yesterday—don't you see that, if you will talk to me, I must go off the ice? I came thinking I should be quite alone; and oh! it is so delicious to get air after you have been sewing all day, and I love to skate so! Don't drive me away!' piteously.

'Drive you away!' he echoed. 'I have been waiting for you all day. Where did you learn to skate so wonderfully? You won't object to my watching you? And, if I maintain perfect silence, may I skate at your side?'

'I learned, as a child, in Canada.' She sighed.

Somehow, the ice and this man's presence brought back a rush of vague, sweet tantalizing memories, such as flooded her mind at times, and always made her present life seem harder.

'Canada?' he repeated; and then he said, abruptly: 'You are not in the least like your sisters. You are the youngest Miss Caxton, I believe?'

'Yes. No; I am not like Blanche or Julia. They are, indeed, quite different.'

Another sigh.

'Quite different,' said the stranger, with emphasis. 'Miss Caxton, I know your name, and I have been introduced to both your sisters. Doesn't that reconcile your stern propriety to take one turn round the lake with me? Hands crossed, you know, we can fly.'

Eola's eyes sparkled.

'There could not be any harm in one turn; and after that, I will go straight off the ice,' she added.

Whereupon, she stretched out her small hands to his ready clasp, and, stroke for stroke, they glided in the very poetry of motion; surely the nearest approach to the motion of wings that human bodies can ever know.

Swift and light, and on, and on, and on—

—it was like a dream.

When, at length, they paused for breath Eola was flushed, and radiant, and sparkling, lovely as a dream, and her companion regarded her attentively.

'And now I must go,' said the girl, with decision. 'The exercise has cured my headaches.'

'It has done me great good, too. I never saw anyone twine skate as you do.'

He knelt down on the ice, and took off her skates.

She had the prettiest little feet, albeit her boots left something to be desired; then he said—

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She had all her wits about her, and in an instant she remembered she had seen some planks, placed from the arbor in which people put on their skates to the ice to make a footway.

She ran thither and seizing one of the planks, began to drag it along the bank.

But, ah! it was heavy, and she could not drag it quickly, and each moment—each moment counted for so much.

She peered wildly everywhere, never stopping, but it was such indistinct light that, had anyone been there she might not have seen.

She cried 'Help, help!' but she had no breath.

She struggled forward with the heavy plank, and at last she reached the spot.

'Are you there?' she called but her voice could scarcely articulate.

Another shout, muffled and indistinct, answered her, and with a new store of strength—such strength as she really never knew she possessed—Eola lifted the plank and put one of its ends firmly on the bank the other end just reached to that hole in the ice, where she could see nothing but where she knew that a man was drowning, for the ice cracked and cracked with his struggles to keep himself from going under.

She had come only just in time.

She ran along the plank to cry out to him, and now her voice was quite loud and distinct—

'Catch hold of the plank and draw yourself up. I will keep it steady,' and then she ran back and sat down upon the end which rested on the bank.

She acted as wisely and as coolly as if she did not care, and she sat with all her weight quietly on the plank, while she felt the struggle going on at its other end.

The man gripped the plank, and slowly—for his hands were numb—drew himself inch by inch out from the freezing water.

Once he got his shoulders free, the rest was easy.

But before that, Eola watched as in a nightmare, her heart beating wildly, her every nerve tingling, longing to go to his assistance, yet a kind of instinct keeping her motionless.

Had she removed her weight from the plank it would have tipped up under the weight upon its other end, and all her trouble would have been useless.

She scarcely realized that, but she felt and obeyed the saving instinct.

She saw the tall figure appear, and stand for a moment, with face upturned to the quiet sky, from out which myriads of stars were gleaming brilliantly now, and she felt that he was offering a prayer of thanksgiving for an escape from death.

She clasped her own hands, and bent her head over them, and then she heard the deep, musical voice, a little hoarse, speaking above her—

'How can I thank you?'

Eola sprang up briskly.

She was shivering, but it was not with cold, and her eyes were full of tears.

'Oh! don't stand there making pretty speeches. Your clothes are freezing on you. Go home and change them. Quick—quick!'

He did not pay the slightest attention to her imperious mandates.

'And you dragged this heavy plank here unaided, and you thought of it all in a moment's flash! And you acted calmly—sensibly, as very few men would have had the wit to do. And you are altogether, to me, a new experience of woman.'

She stamped her foot.

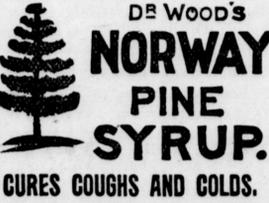
'You are freezing. You will be dead tomorrow if you make speeches now. Oh, I implore you to get home to bed! Run—run as fast as you can!'

'There is no hurry. I will move, certainly, for I am numb—that icy water—what a death! And I owe my life to you.'

He was walking at her side, and Eola, thinking that their ways must lie together until they left the Highfields estate, marched him on rapidly.

'Please don't keep repeating that, and pray—the blue eyes looked up frightened—'don't tell anybody what has happened, because, you see, I have no business to be here at all, and if it should get known—'

'That you have saved the life of a man to whom you have never been introduced,' (CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)



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