

On the Eve of St. Valentine.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS—PART II.

CHAPTER I.

"I'll have the fair one!" said Lady Wakeman, "I can't bear dark children!"

A sigh escaped the Rev. Joseph Leek. He had hoped her ladyship might adopt both, the babies being twins.

He had six boys of his own to provide for out of his slender income, and he was by no means anxious to take charge of his sister's child, though he would have taken the two had not Lady Wakeman come to his relief with her offer of adopting one.

"Had you fixed on the fair one for yourself?" she asked.

"Oh, no! It doesn't make any difference to me which it is. I only hope they will grow up good girls. But my poor sister was always thoughtless and headstrong and her husband was a bad one all round."

"A nice lookout, upon my word!" said her ladyship, laughing. "But we'll defy heredity, you and I, and see which can turn out the best specimen of womanhood. Who was Mr. de Windt?"

The vicar shook his mournfully.

"I haven't a notion. When Elspeth married him, he was a German count. Six months later he was glad to play second cornet in a fourth rate orchestra. A month before he died he had taken up scene painting at some low theatre."

"I don't even know his nationality, except that he was certainly not English. His manners were all right, and his morals were all wrong; but he made a tolerable husband to my poor sister, and she simply adored him. I believe his sudden death helped to kill her."

"Poor soul! Then you can't even feel sure the man's name was really de Windt?"

"Not in the least, Lady Wakeman."

"Good! I shall take my twin abroad for a year or two, and bring her back as Marie Wakeman, a distant cousin of my late husband's. The children need not know they are related unless anything happens to make it necessary to tell them."

"Very well," agreed Mr. Leek. "I don't see it can make any difference; and it will prevent possible jealousy as they grow up. Elspeth might resent knowing that her sister is better off than herself."

"Possibly. Ask your wife to provide Marie with all necessaries, will you? Here is a cheque for twenty pounds. Keep the surplus for the other child—I daresay it will come in useful. I want you to bring Marie to me at—suppose we say the Metropole, this day week. I'll have a nurse ready—one who can't talk English. She'll be safer just at first."

A week later, therefore, the Rev. Joseph and Mrs. Leek travelled to town for the day, taking with them the blue-eyed, fair-haired Marie.

And a day or two after that they left their old home in Hampshire, for a living in Buckinghamshire, which they owed to Lady Wakeman's kindness.

Here nobody knew that baby Elspeth had a twin sister, or that their father had been handsome scamp.

Indeed, that fact was known to very few people at all, for Mr. Leek had not cared to talk of his sister and her husband.

It is all very well to make up one's mind to defy hereditary tendencies, but it does not always prove easy of accomplishment.

By the time Elspeth de Windt was seven years old, she had developed a larger share of original sin than her six boy cousins could boast among them.

To be sure they were remarkably good—painfully good.

They never did wrong, except by the sheerest accident; they did not know how it felt even to want to be naughty.

The whole six were models of propriety and their parent's perpetual pride and joy.

But Elspeth made up for the lot.

She was destructive, deceitful, passionate, disobedient—everything in the way of naughtiness that so young a child could be.

She told stories, apparently for the pleasure of making them up, certainly not because she feared punishment.

She would take a hearty sleeping with a smile, and cared not at all for being shut up alone for a day on a diet of bread and butter.

She generally found occupation for her hours of loneliness.

All that was breakable within her reach she would break; should no other amusement be possible she would strip the paper from the walls.

So that, on the whole, her uncle and aunt suffered more than she did from her punishment.

Yet it was not easy to help loving the child.

She was a fascinating little witch, with all her father's power of pleasing, and with his versatile talent into the bargain.

She could sing like a nightingale, pick out tunes on any instrument that came in her way, dance like a fairy, and draw figures which were by no means unlike what she intended them to be: that is to say, a cow was undoubtedly a cow, and a sheep a sheep, however peculiar their anatomical details.

So, while Mr. Leek and his wife bewailed their misfortune in having so great a responsibility left on their hands, they would not willingly have parted with the child.

Lady Wakeman's report of the little Marie was more promising.

She appeared to be a tolerably normal specimen of juvenile humanity, on which

account the Rev. Joseph heartily congratulated his old friend.

Elspeth did not improve with years, except in the matter of looks.

She was so winsome a maid by the time she had reached her sixteenth birthday that three out of her six cousins were openly in love with her.

She scouted them all, telling them they ought to have been girls, for they hadn't an ounce of manhood among them.

She had given up her childish trick of 'perverting the truth,' as she called it.

On one occasion her uncle had hit upon the lucky experiment of telling her that she was a coward, explaining that the telling of falsehoods is a sure sign of cowardice.

From that moment a more truthful girl than Elspeth de Windt could not have been found in the United Kingdom.

One other good quality she possessed besides courage, and that was industry.

She took to work of all kinds as instinctively as a duck takes to swimming, and while hands and brain were legitimately employed in useful service, she was as harmless as one of her immaculate boy cousins.

On her eighteenth birthday she was permitted to give a garden party to her small circle of acquaintances—of friends she had none, as she counted friendship.

Her uncle and aunt's presence on the occasion was a new trick, which was not sent home until the morning of the birthday, and which proved then to be so badly made that Elspeth flew into a passion, and vowed she would make her own dresses in future.

Her aunt commended so worthy a resolution, little thinking what would come of her approval.

On the following day Miss de Windt walked into Rocklea, the nearest town, returning some three hours later with the cool announcement that she had arranged with Madame Robier, the leading dressmaker of Rocklea, to become one of her indoor 'hands.'

"I thought I had better be indoors, you know, aunt, because the days are getting short, and you have often said I am not to be on the prowl alone after dusk."

Mrs. Leek was struck dumb for the time being.

Elspeth had been so quiet of late that she had foolishly imagined the girl had made up her mind to attend more to the conventionalities of life in future.

The Rev. Joseph rubbed his hands with glee when he heard of this new escapade.

"Leave her alone, my dear; let her be," he said to his wife. "She'll do now—you mark my words. I have for some time past had a growing suspicion that all her bits of naughtiness have had their origin in nothing more evil than an unusual supply of energy."

"But think of it, Joseph! Our niece a dressmaking hand! What will people say?"

"Let them say what they like, my dear. The child's well being is surely of more importance than the gossip of the countryside."

This silenced Mrs. Leek; but, not having her husband's generous allowance of common-sense, nor his broad-minded way of looking at things, she suffered considerably during the next few weeks, until a fresh source of annoyance arose.

Miss Elspeth de Windt was reported to have been seen frequently taking evening walks in the company of the hairdresser's assistant, next door to Madame Robier's establishment.

"This was too much even for the vicar to pass over."

He cycled into Rocklea and asked his niece of it was true.

"Oh, quite," she owned, with a twinkle in her rare black eyes. "He wants to marry me, too! Think of my having had a bona-fide proposal, uncle! It was this way: I wanted to learn hair dressing—it might come in useful, you see—so I got Charlie Hobbs to give me lessons. Nice name, Hobbs, isn't it? So poetical, you can rhyme it so easily. Well, Charlie is an enterprising youth, and, when he found I had a decided talent for dressing hair, I suppose he thought we might work up a good thing between us. It's rather a pity; because I had to tell him last night that I have no leanings in that direction, and he went off in a huff, leaving me to find my way back alone."

The vicar laughed; he couldn't help himself.

Her way of describing her first 'romance' was so comic, with that wicked twinkle of the eye to give expression to it, 'I came over to scold you, you monkey. What am I to say to your aunt?' 'Tell her I have learned as much of dressing making in a month as some girls do in a year; Madame Robier says so. And say that my present 'young man' is a bank clerk; it's quite true. I knew something of banking. When I am tired of him, I shall go in for a lawyer.'

Mr. Leek chuckled to himself as he wheeled homewards.

"She all right," he told his wife. "We need not be in the least uneasy about her."

He might possibly have seen cause to change his mind had he been in the Rocklea Assembly Rooms on a certain evening some weeks later.

A fancy dress ball had been announced for St. Valentine's Eve.

It was a mixed affair, as such balls so

frequently are.

Madame Robier's assistants were there to a girl, Elspeth being far and away the most noticeable of them in her self-designed costume of Night.

A full, plainly made dress of black gauze, with dead white stars scattered over it; black gloves, stockings, and shoes.

The bodice was cut square, with short sleeves, allowing glimpses of white arms to be visible above the long gloves.

Round her neck was a band of black velvet, and affixed to it a brooch of paste brilliants, forming a crescent moon.

Similar adornments were in her black hair, and round her waist, and there was one on each shoe.

Her face was painted white and powdered to complete the effect, which aided by her great black eyes and the straight black brows above, was sufficiently weird to look a trifle uncanny.

Her programme was filling rapidly, when a stranger was presented to her.

A tall, slight, distinguished-looking man, with a face almost as white as her own, dressed entirely in black, a cavalier's cape concealing what there might possibly have been of white in the shape of collar and tie, though even these were missing, as Elspeth found later.

"Goddess of Night, permit me to make the Prince of Midnight known to you!" said the master of ceremonies, indignantly passing on to perform similar good offices for others.

It was an understood thing that everybody was to be known for the time being only as the character or thing he or she was supposed to represent.

Midnight bowed low, his eyes—black as Elspeth's own—fixed boldly on her face with the assurance of a man who felt himself in company where there was no need to be on his guard.

His upward-curling moustache and somewhat pointed chin gave him a Mephistophelian look, which took Elspeth's fancy at once, and aroused in her the passing whim to meet this man on his own ground, whatever that might prove to be—not too exalted a level, she felt sure.

CHAPTER II.

He was by no means slow in giving expression to his discontent in finding her programme so plentifully covered with hieroglyphics.

"I shall rub out some of them," he said coolly, suiting the action to the word. "I am convinced you dance well. Those feet couldn't help doing so."

A lingering glance at the satin shoes and black clad ankles emphasized this remark.

Elspeth opened her fan—a study of night, with a white crescent moon and white stars—and looked at him over the top of it.

"You don't belong to Rocklea," she observed. "I wonder who you are and where you come from?"

"My name is Jones, and I hail from London," was the prompt reply, a slight smile giving her a glimpse of white, shining teeth behind the film lips. "What is your name?"

"Proserpine, of course!"

"Then I'll be Pluto for tonight! Come, they are starting a dance."

"But I am engaged for it to St. Valentine himself. I shall not disappoint him."

"Nonsense! Come, sweetheart!"

"Sir!"

"Pluto to his wife," was the cool retort.

"If Proserpine was not Pluto's sweetheart, she ought to have been."

Elspeth laughed and sailed away from him in the arms of a very handsome St. Valentine.

"A wicked little witch, if I am any judge, muttered the man thus left to himself. She 'She'll serve to amuse me for an hour or two. I must find out who and what she is, and then I shall know how far I can go with her."

He asked for the desired information of the master of ceremonies.

"I know it's against the rules, but I am sure I have met her before, and yet she denies me the privilege of old acquaintance ship."

"She's a Miss White"—he had been told that Elspeth had started her business life under that name, out of regard to her aunt's feelings.

"I thought as much. And her occupation?"

"Dressmaking."

"Exactly. Thank you."

The master of ceremonies smiled to himself as he walked off.

Of course he saw through the other man's little game; but he did not think 'Miss White' would object to his 'giving her away' to this striking-looking stranger.

For the next dance she was promised to the bank clerk, appropriately got up as Money, with coins sewn all over his clothes but she had no hesitation in throwing him over for Prince Midnight, who she found, had scrawled probably his rightful initials on her card, 'A. C.'

"I wonder what A. C.'s stands for?" she thought, when his arm encircled her, and she half closed her eyes in dreamy content as they went down the room to the strains of 'Morgenblätter.' 'He doesn't look an Arthur, nor an Alec, nor anything in daily use.'

"Thoughts worth a penny?" he asked presently.

"Money would not buy them!"

"No? They must be very precious! Why did you paint your face? Perhaps, though it is your custom!"

"No! I am no Jezebel. Of course I know it's usual now-a-days, but no sensible girl does it."

"You call yourself a sensible girl?"

"Certainly!"

"Then why paint for to-night?"

"Because my cheeks always get red when I am excited, and a rosy Night is not true to Nature!"

"Down is rosy sometimes. Could you not have represented Dawn?"

"I preferred Night. Night is mysterious, and suggestive of all sorts of hidden possibilities."

"Like yourself?"

"Yes; like myself?"

"What sort of possibilities—good or evil?"

"Evil, chiefly. How superbly you danced where did you graduate?"

"In the same school as yourself."

"Down below?"

"Of course."

They both laughed a little.

Then he asked another question—

"Is your neck painted?"

"Does it look so?"

"It is very white. Yes or no?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe you. I shall have to find out myself before the evening is over, to punish you for that falsehood."

"Proserpine is permitted, surely, to tell an occasional fib?"

"Not to Pluto."

"Do wives always tell their husbands the truth?"

"Perhaps not—ordinary human wives; but you are not human, you are either eldritch or demon."

"I feel flattered. And you?"

"I am all demon; there is no doubt about me."

"You look rather Mephistophelian."

"Oh! Mephisto is altogether a too earthly and respectable character for me to play. I am something more out of the common, I assure you."

"Thank you for the warning."

"It was not intended as a warning. There is enough wickedness in you to respond to the evil in myself. Is it not so?"

Their eyes met, and for an instant Elspeth held her breath.

She had fancied he was jesting, but he certainly looked the reverse of saintly at that moment.

After their second waltz, he drew her away behind a bank of palms and other greenery, and kissed her forehead, saying again in his cool way—

"Pluto to his wife. You please me well, fair consort."

Should she repulse him?

Had the night been at an end instead of still so young, she would assuredly have done so.

But she did not wish to spoil her fun; and he fascinated her in a way, and infected her with a spirit of diablerie which tempted her to go through the evening, as her co-workers, Madame Robier's would certainly do.

Not one of them would have been troubled with scruples as to encouraging this audacious stranger.

"I may never see him again," she said to herself, "and he can't find out who I am. It's against the rules for anyone to be told who anybody else is."

So she yielded to the strong temptation to do what she not only knew to be wrong but felt to be an insult to her self-respect.

At the end of their third waltz, she allowed him to give her champagne, another step in the wrong direction, for she was not used to taking anything, and it quickly went to her head.

They were alone in a nook he had contrived by moving a large screen, which now effectively hid their little table and themselves.

In an instant his arms were about her, and his lips on hers.

Then, with a laugh, he kissed her warm, soft, throat beneath the velvet band.

"I knew it was not painted," he murmured.

"Lie still against my heart, sweet Proserpine."

She had no choice but to obey.

Closing her eyes in semi-ecstasy, semi-consciousness, she leant against him while he kissed her at will, on face, and neck and arms.

But the effect of the champagne she had swallowed did not last long.

She soon made a slight effort to free herself.

He only clasped her closer, whispering passionately—

"No, No! I cannot let you go. Stay where you are, heart's dearest."

She had never been made love to after this fashion.

For a short while longer she yielded to the fascination he exercised over her, so enthralling her senses that she had no real wish to be released.

It was not until she heard a voice calling her by her assumed name of 'Miss White' that she insisted upon throwing off those encircling arms.

Going round the screen she looked to see who called.

The master of ceremonies stood a short distance away, asking—

"Has nobody seen her? Where the dickens has she got to? Miss White!"

"I am here. What is it?"

"He gave her a note."

"Messenger said it is important."

She recognised her uncle's handwriting. Opening it, with a sinking heart, and a vague anticipation of evil, she read—

"MY DEAR CHILD.—Your aunt is very ill. Come at once."

"UNCLE JOE."

All the diablerie had vanished from the eyes she raised to meet Prince Midnight's, as he asked—

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Yes; my aunt is ill. I must go to her."

In an instant he was as changed as herself.

"How can I help you?"

"By leaving me, and forgetting that you have met me. I have been mad, and this is my punishment."

Don't talk nonsense child! What matters it how one behaves in a scene like this? But, if it really troubles you, I will promise to go away, and not try to see you again, when I have done what I can to help you. It is no use to rebel; I am used to having my way. Where have you to go?"

"To Madame Robier's first. I must get rid of this paint, and change my dress. It is only in the next street; we can walk."

He wrapped her cloak around her, and they started at once, he tinking rapidly the while.

It was evident he had made a mistake in taking her for a 'dressmaking hand.'

She had only been acting the part of a cab driver.

At Madame Robier's door she held out her hand, saying—

"Thank you for coming with me. Good-night."

He took the hand, and raised it to his lips.

"You have not finished with me yet. Go and change your dress, and I will get you a cab. Can I look out a train for you?"

"No. I have only to go a couple of miles."

"Very good. Don't try and give me the slip. I promise I'll not follow you, or make any attempt to find out who you are. You will trust me?"

"Yes."

She vanished into the dimly-lit passage, and he went off in search of a cab, which drove up as she re-appeared in the doorway, soberly clad in a navy blue coat and skirt, and a toque to match.

He lingered a moment when he had helped her into the cab.

"Just one question. Your name is not White?"

"No. Good-bye and thank you so much."

"Au revoir! It shall not be good-bye, though I vow I'll keep my word. But I feel we shall meet again some day. Don't forget me."

"I shall try to."

"You won't succeed."

He bent his face to hers, but she shrank back.

"Please not!"

"Forgive me—for this, and for all! By Heaven, we must meet again! It is torture to part from you. I love you; and, sooner or later, my love will find you. Had he spoken truth?"

His words rang in her ears and echoed in her heart as she covered her face with her hands, ashamed, even in the darkness, to remember how low she had fallen that evening.

"What an awful lot of wickedness there must be in me!" she thought despairingly. "But I feel somehow as though he understood. Shall I ever see him again? Oh, I hope—I hope I shall!"

Then, with a sort of shock, she remembered her aunt, and blamed herself afresh for having been heartless enough to forget even for a moment that she was ill.

CHAPTER III.

Mrs. Leek had a sharp attack of pneumonia, through which her niece attended her with more zeal than skill.

So lacking did Elspeth find herself in the useful art of nursing, that she made up her mind to "cut the dressmaking," and enter at some hospital for the necessary training.

She could make her own dresses now, after a fashion; at any rate, she had learned enough to be able to put to rights any dressmaker she might, in future, employ—and that was all she desired.

But she kept her new resolve to herself until such time as her aunt should be well enough to dispense with her services.

When, at length, that happy day arrived, it was destined to close the reverse of happily for all at the vicarage.

Elspeth was sitting with Mrs. Leek, after lunch, industriously darning socks for her uncle and cousins, and only awaiting the return of the former from a batch of christenings he had on hand, to meet the subject of her proposed new departure.

The vicar did not get home until five o'clock, and then he brought with him a countenance so serious and perturbed that Elspeth guessed at once what had happened; he had heard of her behaviour at the fancy dress ball.

She had known it would come sooner or later; but she had hoped to get away first, shrinking curiously from the look of pain and disappointment which she felt would be visible on the two faces she loved in her own peculiar way.

"What has happened, Uncle Joe? You look as if you had been conducting a funeral," he replied, "and that your own, Elspeth de Windt."

"Uncle!"

She started to her feet, and stared at him.

It was the first really harsh speech he had ever made to her; and the scoldings she had received from time to time had all come from her aunt.

The vicar turned to his wife.

"You were right, and I was wrong. That dressmaking had proved her ruin. On the night you were taken ill, she was masquerading at a fancy ball—a very mixed affair—at which she made herself conspicuous by her encouragement of a man she could not have known anything about, for he was a stranger to the neighborhood. Notwithstanding this, she left the assembly rooms in my company, shortly before receiving my note announcing your illness, and took him to the house which she had chosen to make her home."

"Uncle!" said Elspeth again, with the light of battle in her eye. "I don't know who told you all this, but it is not true."

"Your proof to the contrary?" inquired her uncle briefly.

"Mr. Wood, who acted as master of ceremonies for the evening, could contradict the latter part of it."

"Unfortunately, I was referred to Mr. Wood for corroboration of the report, which I refused to believe until I had this word for the truth of it."

"He has lied!" said Elspeth deliberately, not waiting to choose her words. "He gave me your note himself at the Assembly Rooms, in the presence of the gentleman with whom I had been sitting out a dance."

"With whom you had sat out three dances running, Miss de Windt, during which time you were hidden from view behind a large screen which your gentleman friend had carefully arranged for the purpose."

The mixture of truth and falsehood in the report which had reached the vicar's ears was difficult for Elspeth to sit unaided.

Had Mr. Wood forgotten the circumstance of the delivery of the note, or had

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