

whose words of reproof of such frequent occurrence. To be sure, Frank was a very naughty boy, and his misdemeanours were as numerous as the sands of the sea-shore; but it is an open question whether a little more love, and a little less severity, might not have had a beneficial effect upon his juvenile morals.

The love was there, in as large or even larger proportion as the severity, but its well-spring lay deep below the surface, so deep that its actual existence was not realised by its object.

Frank himself meanwhile was pacing up and down the moonlit garden, a cigar between his lips and perplexity in his mind. He was, as he would have expressed it, in 'a tight place,' and so far as he could judge there was no possible egress.

Presently, however, a possible solution, or at any rate a bright idea seemed to dawn through the fog of his bewilderment, and, first glancing cautiously round him, he took up a handful of gravel and threw it deftly at a lighted window on the upper floor.

There was a moment's delay, and then the moonlight shone upon the charming face of Mrs. Lomer's lady-help, as she leaned out of the open window and smiled down upon this modern Romeo.

'Go away, Frank, for heaven's sake,' was her somewhat prosaic greeting. 'Suppose anyone should see you?'

'Oh, it is all right! The governor and mother are safe in the drawing room. Why did you not show at dinner, Ruth? You are not really ill, are you, darling?'

Ruth laughed softly.

'Oh, well,' she said, 'I had a splitting headache, but of course I should have waited as usual if you had not been there. I felt I wanted a private rehearsal before I appeared before you, sir, in my new robe. Frank, have—have you told them?'

'Not I; I am puzzling my brains how I shall do it. The governor will be all right; he said you were a "deuced handsome girl," by the way, but mother looked like a thundercloud, and she always gives him his cue.'

'Oh, it will all come right, somehow,' was her cheerful rejoinder, 'and—good heavens, I hear footsteps!'

And in another instant the window was shut and the blind drawn, and the lady-help had vanished.

PART III.

The next morning Frank 'took his courage in both his hands,' as the French describe it, and strolled into his mother's special sanctum where she sat writing letters.

'Are you very busy, mother?' he asked.

'Well, I was, but if you have anything to say to me I can finish these later.'

'He is going to confide in me,' she said to herself, with an unaccustomed feeling of pleasure stirring at her heart.

Frank walked over to the fire-place and leaned his arm on the carved oak mantel-piece, his eyes fixed on the leaping flames.

'You won't like what I am going to say,' he began, abruptly. 'I warn you of that, but you ought to know it, so it is no use beating about the bush. I am engaged to the dearest girl in the world, mother, and—I am going to be received into the Catholic Church,' and then, with the restless feeling of one who has 'burned his boots,' Frank stood upright and faced his petrified parent.

For a moment Mrs. Lomer was rendered speechless with surprise and horror. During a restless night she had imagined many evils which might have befallen her son, but she had not dreamt of anything quite so appalling as this.

'You, a Catholic?' she exclaimed at last. 'You must have taken leave of your senses!'

'On the contrary: only just gained possession of them, mother mine,' he said, crossing the room and laying a caressing hand upon her shoulder.

Now that the dreaded commencement had been made, his spirits had recovered their usual easy-going buoyancy, a quality inherited from his father.

'Let us thrash it all out out,' he added, taking a seat beside her. 'I am six and twenty, you know, mother, quite old enough to know my own mind, and to be able to distinguish right from wrong, and I am convinced that the Catholic religion is the only true one, and I am going to join it. I should be acting the part of a hypocrite if I stayed where I am now.'

A whole volume of indignation was trembling on the extreme tip of Mrs. Lomer's tongue, but by a violent effort she contrived to defer its publication a little longer.

'It will make no difference where you and the governor are concerned,' continued Frank soothingly, 'or at least if it does it will be a difference on the right side, for I shall probably give you a jolly sight less trouble than I do now. I ought to, at any rate.'

'Some woman has got hold of you,' exclaimed his mother furiously. 'What did you say about being engaged?'

In her dismay, at what she mentally termed his 'perversion,' she had been momentarily oblivious of the lesser evil. A tender light came into Frank's blue eyes.

'She is a Catholic, too,' he said softly.

'There, I knew it! It is her wiles, then, which have led you into this—this tomfoolery!'

'Gently, mother,' interrupted Frank with a quiet dignity which was entirely new to him, and which caused his listener considerable astonishment. 'I cannot allow you to speak in that manner either of the religion I am going to join, or of the lady who has consented to be my wife. It is probably her prayers which have had a good deal to do with my conversion, for she refused to have anything to say to me while I was still a Protestant.'

'There, I knew it!' repeated Mrs. Lomer, triumphantly. 'What was that but a wife, I should like to know? She knew well enough that you would throw any principles overboard in order to get what you wanted. Men are all like that.'

'She did not know it,' replied Frank, calmly. His temper was rising rapidly, but he realised that his best policy was to keep as cool as possible under the present highly irritating circumstances.

'She refused me finally three months ago on account of my religion, and I did not see her again until I had read and studied the question, and consulted a Jesuit priest, and became thoroughly convinced that the Catholic Church was the only true one. It was she put the idea of inquiring into my head, naturally, but that was all she had to do with it, besides, as I said before, praying for me.'

'What is her name?' asked his mother in a calmer tone. It was the calmness of despair.

Frank hesitated, and a gleam of mischief came into his eyes.

'May I come in?' said a voice at the door. 'Oh, I beg your pardon; I thought you were alone, I wanted to know—'

'Don't go, Ruth,' interposed Mrs. Lomer, hastily, as the newcomer was preparing to make a hurried exit.

There was no use, she thought, in prolonging a painful discussion, and her son was now provided with a tangible safeguard against the charms of her lady-help. In fact, nothing was of any consequence.

This feeling of helpless passiveness, however, was suddenly changed to one of active horror and dismay, for as Ruth—her face flushed and her eyes downcast, advanced timidly into the room, Frank went boldly up to her and took her reluctant hand.

'Her name,' he said, 'is Ruth Chester!'

'Frank!' screamed Mrs. Lomer. 'Are you mad? My lady-help!'

PART IV.

General Lomer was enjoying a stolen nap in the seclusion of his study, when his wife made an abrupt and unceremonious entrance and roused him from his dreams.

'James,' she said, her voice trembling with various conflicting emotions, 'Frank has disgraced himself.'

'What has happened now?' inquired her husband sleepily. 'We seem to be living on the edge of a volcano nowadays. Has he eloped with the lady-help?'

'He is going to marry her,' was the astounding reply.

'What, already?' exclaimed the general.

He was wide-awake now, and considerably taken aback by the nature of his wife's information.

'This is a case of love at first sight with a vengeance,' he added. 'But,' vaguely, 'I thought you said there was another woman, eh?'

'Oh, don't talk nonsense, James,' said Mrs. Lomer, in a tone of intense irritation. 'She is the woman, don't you understand?'

'Perhaps I might if you would explain matters to me a little, my dear,' returned her husband meekly. 'At present, I must confess, I am rather in a fog.'

'Well, do listen quietly, and don't interrupt me every moment, for this is really a serious affair. It seems that Frank met this Miss Chester some months ago, while staying with the Crofts in Surrey, and completely lost his head about her. She is a handsome girl, certainly.'

'She is, indeed,' said the general emphatically.

'Do you wish to hear the story or not, James,' asked Mrs. Lomer, blandly.

'Oh, I beg your pardon, my dear, I quite forgot, it shan't occur again.'

'Well, he proposed to the girl after a fortnight's acquaintance and she acknowledged that she cared about him, but at the same time refused to have anything to do with him because he was not a Roman Catholic. He did all he could to persuade her to alter her mind but she remained firm, and really, although it was all for the sake of a delusion, she deserves credit for it, for Frank can be very eloquent when he chooses, and,' with a gleam of mother's love in her eyes, 'it must have been no easy task to resist him.'

'H'm,' murmured the general.

'After that he went away in despair, and now comes the worst part of this miserable business. The wretched, misguided boy began to study all kind-of pernicious books, and finally consulted one of those double-faced Jesuits who bamboozled him—there is no other word for it—into promising to change his religion.'

'Change his religion?' shouted the general, unable to restrain his tongue an instant longer. 'My boy a Papist?'

'Yes, that is what is going to happen to us,' remarked Mrs. Lomer, bitterly. 'Our only son is going to desert the Church in which he was baptised, and is also about to marry the woman who has been acting in the capacity of my lady-help.'

'But—but,' stammered the general, his face becoming gradually purple with suppressed agitation. 'What—what does he mean by it, eh? and what business had this hussy to come masquerading here? I—I will have her up here now, by jove, and tell her what I think of her designing ways.'

'No, no, James,' said his wife hurriedly, laying a restraining hand upon his arm as he was about to ring the bell.

The idea of a scene was abhorrent to her, and besides, at the bottom of her heart there lurked an unacknowledged feeling of sympathy for the girl who had such an artistic eye for the arrangement of dinner tables, and who had been ready to renounce the man she loved at the call of—what she considered—duty.

Her husband cast a scrutinizing glance in her direction, and a careful observer would have noticed that there was a twinkle of amusement in his eyes.

'I thought that would fetch the old lady,' he reflected. 'Now, if I can only keep it up a little longer she will be ready to give them both her blessing in a quarter of an hour.'

'I tell you I will have it out with her, Laura,' he continued, 'and that young rascal too. They shall both come and let me hear what they have to say for themselves. A nice pair, to be sure! And this time, notwithstanding Mrs. Lomer's efforts to prevent him, he did succeed in giving a furious tug to the bell.'

'Ask Miss Chester to come here,' he said, when the summons was answered. 'And—er—tell Mr. Frank that I should be glad if he would come and speak to me for a moment.'