

"No," faltered Fanchea, remembering that Kevin had always been dull at his books.

"He was then an uneducated laborer toiling at his spade; and what do you think seven or eight years of such a life as you describe, fishing, digging, associating with his fellows, have done for him? You and he were once on an equality, and you had many pretty thoughts between you; but circumstances lifted you, a child, out of the state in which you were born, while they left him, a man, in his original condition. He has probably now got a peasant wife and children, and, whatever he may have once promised to be, they have by this time dragged him down to the ordinary level of such husbands and fathers as dwell around them. Imagine his sun-burned face; features and expression coarsened by the years that have passed by since you saw it, his rough, clay-soiled hands, his rude brogue, his uncultivated manners and ignorance of all the refinements of living. Believe me, if you ever become a famous woman, and he then comes, as he probably may, to claim you, you will not find him one with whom you could bear to associate."

Fan had kept her gaze fixed on her companion's countenance from the beginning of this speech, and as he proceeded her eyes became darkened and her mouth set with grief. When he finished, a thrill of pain passed over her face, and she turned away quickly to hide her tears.

"Fan, little Fan," said Rupert, tenderly, "I have hurt you: I have made you weep. Forgive me, listen to me——"

"Go away," said Fan, angrily. "You have broken my heart."

A great sob swallowed her last word; and Captain Wilderspin thought from her distress that her mind had assented to the truths of the picture he had drawn.

"I cannot go away," he said, "without your forgiveness. I would not have hurt you but in the hope of setting you free."

"Free!" cried Fan, piteously. "Of all that is beautiful and bright in my life!"

"Of an illusion that is threatening to overwhelm you with the bitterest disappointment. Fanchea, listen to me and do not speak as if there was no other love for you but what lives in a dream. A hundred such Kevins could not love you as I love you. Nay, do not look so astonished. You must have seen it in my face and heard it in my voice. You must have known long ago how I have loved you."

"I knew that you liked me very much," said Fanchea, abashed, and forgetting her anger, "but not so much as this."

"More than this: more than you can imagine, you simple child; more than I can prove to you, except by a life-long devotion. I would not bribe you to be my wife; but look round you, Fanchea, and see the home that I am able to provide for your future. You need not appear upon the hated stage, where I have always felt that I could not bear to see you; but you shall go wherever you fancy to go, and do whatever you please. To make you happy shall be the object of my life, and I shall be amply repaid if you will only give me the best love of your pure little heart."

Captain Rupert's manner and words became more impassioned as he saw the glow of surprise gradually fade in Fanchea's face and change into the chill of regret. As he finished speaking and stood by her in extreme agitation waiting for her answer the girl raised her eyes wistfully to his. She was deeply touched; grateful for his tenderness, and amazed at his devotion. Yet in spite of the warmth of feeling he had aroused, there was something that warned her to keep herself apart.

"You are very good to me," she said, humbly; "very kind. But it would not be right."

"Why would it not be right?"

"Because I want to find—my friends." She would not mention Kevin again after what had been said about him. "If I were to—do as you wish, I should have to give them up. They would be nothing to you; and if I were ever to meet them, you would be ashamed of them."

"So far from that, I promise you, on my soul, that I will give you every assistance in seeking them. I will make it my duty to find out that obscure mountain you call Killeevy, and we will visit it together and know all that is to be known about your friends. If Kevin is in the world we will bring him to the front, and I will set no limit to the bounties you shall bestow upon him and his."

Fan's eyes widened and shone while her ears took in this tempting promise, and her eyes fixed on Captain Rupert's face assured her of the earnestness of his meaning. But at this interesting moment an interruption occurred; the signora's silver ringlets appeared streaming on the breeze; the signora, with a face full of dismay, was seen coming rapidly towards them. Forewarned as she was, she had perceived from a distance that some unusual conversation was being held, and stood breathless and agitated between her charge and Lord Wilderspin's heir.

"Oh, heaven!" she thought, looking from one to the other, "something serious has been said. I am late."

Her looks were so wild that Fan forgot everything else in anxiety for her condition.

"Has anything dreadful happened?" she asked, throwing a supporting arm round her little friend.

"I do not know—I hope not," stammered the signora. "Herr Harfenspieler is here, and Lord Wilderspin has returned."

"They are not quarrelling?" said Captain Rupert with the hint of a smile. He had begun to suspect the cause of the lady's wildness.

"No, Captain Wilderspin; it is not their way," said the signora, recovering her dignity.

"They are not ill?" asked Fanchea.

"No," said Mamzelle; "nothing is the matter with them, except that one wants his pupil and the other his nephew and heir."

She fixed her eyes on Captain Rupert as she uttered the last words with emphasis; but he did not wither up or sink into the earth.

"And this is what you were coming to tell us," he said, smiling. "And you ran so fast that you lost your breath. It was not wise of you, signora. You have made yourself unwell. Be good enough to take my arm that I may support you to the house."

The signora groaned, but acquiesced; and Fan followed musingly, with her eyes on the ground.

A pleasant, social evening followed. Our friends met at dinner, Lord Wilderspin's burly form at the head of his board. Captain Rupert was in high spirits, and his lordship looked with surprise at his whilom, languid nephew. Herr Harfenspieler, glad of the return of his old friend, had almost forgotten his momentary uneasiness about his pupil, and Mamzelle, seeing Fanchea so quiet and undisturbed, hoped that no great harm had been done after all. Only the old lord himself noticed a new and indescribable expression in Fanchea's face.

"What have you been doing to this girl?" he said, fiercely, to Herr Harfenspieler. "You have been working her too hard."

"Not so," said Herr Harfenspieler, thinking of the lost lesson of the morning.

"She is looking pale; and as old as myself," said his lordship, glaring round upon everybody.

The looks of tenderness centred upon her from all sides were quite what his lordship desired for his protégée, and considered by him a part of the good fortune he had provided for her; yet, as his eye went from one to another of the faces at the board, he was startled by something in that of his nephew which he had no way expected to see; and he in his turn surprised that gentleman by leaning across the table and saying in an undertone:—

"This is only a child, do you see, Captain Wilderspin!"

The brusque words and scowl neither disconcerted nor annoyed Captain Rupert, nor did they make him smile. He returned his uncle's fierce glance with a meaning look that seemed to say he knew all the circumstances and had thoroughly made up his mind.