



CHAPTER XXVII.—(Continued.)

They were not in the veranda when he went out, and he strolled further away to where he knew some seats had been placed. Even then he did not see them; it was Jane's voice which betrayed their presence at the other side of a tent, near which he was standing.

"How can you say such cruel things, and so untrue!" she was saying, in excited indignation.

"I fancy the cruelty lies in the truth of the accusation," answered Jack Blount, cuttingly; and the listener could no longer doubt that Diana Knollys had been correct in her estimate of the man and his power of being disagreeable. "They said you were a flirt. Only a few months ago you jilted Colonel Prinsep—the fellows told me that at mess to-night—and now—"

He stopped suddenly as Colonel Prinsep himself stood before them.

"Perhaps I am the best person to refute that calumny," he said, quietly, but with a repressed passion in his tones, that Jane, knowing him so well, easily detected. "That Miss Knox gave me up was my own fault; I have never had the slightest reason to reproach her."

"Of course if you say so," began Mr. Blount, ungraciously.

"I do say so, and must beg that here at least on which will not refer again to the subject on which you have received such inaccurate information."

With a malicious scowl darkening Blount's face he turned upon his heel and left.

The witchery of the time and place had cast its powerful spell over Stephen Prinsep. Gradually as she spoke he forgot everything except that she had been his love. The moonbeams fell upon her uncovered head and upon her lovely upturned face as she pleaded her extenuation.

"Is it your fault you are so fair? Even that doth not blind to your sweet beauty!" he exclaimed, passionately, and would have said more only that she shrank from him trembling.

As she turned away, bashful, yet so glad, so rapturously glad to know he loved her still, she encountered the stony gaze of Jacob Lynn. He was hidden behind some trees close by, and must have heard what they had said. A sudden fear assailed her lest, in his jealousy, he should come forward and do some desperate deed that would ruin him forever. Even if the Colonel knew of his presence there it might be serious for him.

Colonel Prinsep then led her back to the ball-room in grave silence, angry with himself that he had kept true to what with her had evidently been only an evanescent feeling, yet unable to steel his heart against her.

Barry Larxon sauntered up to them as they stood together in the ball-room.

"They are waiting for you, Colonel, to lead the way in to supper. Miss Knox, I think you promised to go with me."

Startled at his voice Jane withdrew her face from the grateful coolness of the flowers and wondered why, as she did so, he looked at her so strangely.

Colonel Prinsep bowed and left her. Then Major Larxon spoke his thoughts.

"You cannot think how it has pleased me that you have deigned to wear my flowers," he said.

"Your flowers! Was it you who sent them?"

"Who else? I hope you did not choose them under a false impression."

"I—oh, no! I never thought—"

Disregarding her confusion, as he had disregarded the quick movement which she had made to cast the flowers from her when he claimed to be the sender, Barry Larxon had remained silent. When he spoke again it was as though impelled by a feeling stronger than his judgment.

"Miss Knox, I wish I were your brother, or some one that you could trust to advise you well."

"Do you think that I am in need of advice?"

"I do. Will you promise not to be offended if I speak?"

"Yes, I will promise, though I cannot guess what it can be that you are going to say."

The ball-room was deserted now, and they stood alone in the center of it, as though dueling him to say anything that could affect her, and holding her bouquet as far away from her as possible. The flowers that had delighted her had become hateful in her eyes now that she knew the giver, and had actually caressed them in his sight.

Major Larxon looked down at her sadly. "I wonder whether it is worth while to risk the loss of your friendship for the sake of the problematical good that I might do if I spoke; I wonder if it is even worth while to do a disinterested act of kindness?"

"Tell me, and let me decide."

"I will, since you wish it. Do you know what has been the general talk since you entered the room? You do not—of course not. You are too young and inexperienced to believe in malice or idle tongues, and I dare say you fancy it is a profound secret only known to you that you love the Colonel and wish to win him back."

She turned deathly pale, and was too taken by surprise to attempt a contradiction. Looking up she saw his face averted, and was touched by his delicacy, knowing nothing of the swift glance by which he had assured himself that his shaft had gone home.

"Do not be angry with me that I repeat what every one else has said. I thought it right that you should know, and so be able to put an end to the gossip, which in your purity of mind you could not foresee. You are so proud, I know how it would gall you were it to be said that Colonel Prinsep married you with pity."

"Do you think I would marry any one

on such terms?" she cried, indignantly.

"No, I do not; but then every one has

not studied your character so carefully as I. I know that you are too noble to allow any mercenary or interested motives to influence your actions, and I know, also, that you could with a word win back Colonel Prinsep to the allegiance he flattered himself that he had thrown off. Don't be offended that I speak so. Consider the circumstances from an outsider's point of view, and you will see that it is natural he should be glad to have escaped what the world would call a mésalliance, notwithstanding your grace and beauty. Before he loved you so entirely—so unthinkingly, that had you married him then, neither he nor you might have had reason to repent; but now he has had reason to weigh the pros and cons, even—for he is very proud—to congratulate himself that something occurred to part you. When he came back to Alipore, it was in the confidence that to meet you was no longer a danger—that he had, in fact, conquered his unwise love. In these circumstances, you would not care to draw him back to you, as you so easily could, against his better judgment."

She was very pale, but the pride which he had rightly surmised that she suffered.

"Do you think it could be a pleasure to me to see you pained?" he continued.

"It is only that I wanted to spare you a keener pang hereafter. I am a man of the world, Miss Knox; but what is the use of my worldly wisdom if I may only use it for my own good, and never for another's?"

"What I want is worth trying hard for," he returned, stolidly, missing a casual ball, which struck him smartly in the face.

They changed courts now, and began the third set.

Jane was only a beginner at the game, but she picked it up very quickly, and like all graceful women, looked well with a tennis bat in her hand.

She was playing better than usual that afternoon, until turning, with hand upraised to catch a ball that was thrown to her, she espied Colonel Prinsep on a seat behind her, watching the progress of the game. After that she scarcely put one over the net, and when Colonel Grey and Miss Knollys scored an easy victory, professed herself tired and would play no more.

Just as they stopped playing, Valentine Graeme drove up in his high cart and called out to Major Larxon. The Major obeyed the summons, and Jane was left standing alone until Colonel Prinsep joined her.

"Won't you sit down?" he asked.

"Thank you, I am not tired."

Sometimes Colonel Prinsep lost his temper, as was the case now.

"You mean that you will not admit to me that you are tired."

"I mean that I do not wish to sit down," she returned, composedly, ignoring his innuendo.

Major Larxon came back, looking rather glum.

"There's Graeme hurt his foot at cricket—ball hit his ankle. This will stop our theatricals, I am afraid."

"Poor Mr. Graeme—I'm so sorry!" said Jane.

"He wants to talk to you about those same theatricals," went on Barry Larxon.

"Will you come?"

She went at once, both gentlemen following.

"Does it hurt you very much?" she asked of Valentine Graeme, as he leaned down from the cart to hold the proffered hand.

"Not much, only when I move it; but the doctor says I shall feel it for the next three weeks. What bothers me is our play. I did so want to act with you, and I can't possibly limp about the stage."

"Can you not get some one to take your part?" asked Larxon.

"Why won't you?" said Jane, quickly, fearing lest another substitute should offer himself.

"I am very glad of your friendship, very proud of it," she said, gently.

"Then I am more than repaid," he answered, gravely.

As they went toward the supper-room, they met several persons returning thence, among them Diana Knollys, who was leaning on Colonel Prinsep's arm. She smiled kindly at Jane, who returned the glance, carefully avoiding to look at the same time into her companion's face. If scandal were so easily set afire, it was scarcely sufficient to show indifference only, she must prove to him that his presence was positively distasteful to her.

"I wonder where Jack Blount is; I have not seen him for some time," said Barry Larxon, abruptly, as they passed on.

"I think he has left," faltered Jane, trying to look unconscious, but failing beneath the keen gaze that was directed on her.

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Laughing at his sally, Jane forgot that she had been hurt by Miss Knollys' thoughtless remark. It was now nearly a week since the—th Hussars' dance, and each day Major Larxon had made himself more necessary to her, making good his claim to her friendship. Though very gentle with her, she never seemed to consider her a subject for pity—which would have galled her more—but always when she needed help, however trivial, she found him ready at her side.

They had played two sets, Jane and Major Larxon against Miss Knollys and Colonel Grey.

"Quite a regiments game. I feel an outsider," Miss Knollys had observed.

"You need not be so longer than you like," answered Colonel Grey, impressively.

"You are very persevering," smiled Diana.

"What I want is worth trying hard for," he returned, stolidly, missing a casual ball, which struck him smartly in the face.

They changed courts now, and began the third set.

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