

motto; this was led by the marshal, who beat time gracefully with her fan.

It was a pretty scene, that group of young girls, standing "as rich as Emperor Moths" beneath the grove of saplings—scarcely to be called trees, yet casting a grateful shadow this warm June day—singing in soft murmuring cadence the sad song of regret at parting, with its burden of the motto chosen four years ago—"Dabunt aspera rosas." Surely, among the bystanders, in the hearts of parents and friends, a wish, a prayer, went up that "Rough places will bring roses," might be an ever-recurring refrain, lingering in these maidens' hearts, to sweeten what

of toil, care, and sorrow the after-years might bring. And then nothing was left but to drive away, and preserve in thought and memory the many pretty and effective groupings that this Vassar class day had put before us. And as I mused upon this College life, so new to me, I could but wonder at its many contrasting elements, possible nowhere, surely, but in America. Great land of inconsistencies!—the contrasts of mental energy with frivolous fancy, of justifiable and fitting ceremonial with vain display, of earnest strenuous work with no less earnest strenuous play, which had been briefly, but forcibly, epitomised in the proceedings of those two last days.

J. D. HUNTING.

Murder—or Mercy?

A STORY OF TO-DAY.



IT was half-past four, and the morning-room at Minton Court was dotted with confidential groups. Huge logs blazed in the two fireplaces, but no lamps or candles had been brought in to disturb the intimacy of the twilight hour. Tea at Minton Court was always drunk by firelight on winter afternoons. "Darkness is such an aid to scandal," Lady Minton used to say; "how can we pull our neighbours to pieces in the glare of those odious lamps? Half the best things I have ever heard have been told me in the dusk."

The hour of tea was a sociable one, and the surroundings were thoroughly feminine. The morning-room was furnished in that heterogeneous manner which is the characteristic of our time. There were many screens, and palms in brass pots, Indian mats and Japanese tables, Turkish divans and Smyrnesse carvings, while a number of Rajon etchings, framed in black, made a sad note on the Pompeian-red walls, giving the otherwise over-luxurious room that touch of studied pathos which is ever present in the complex and many-sided life of to-day. The curtains were not yet drawn, and far off, apart from the group of dainty figures who were clustering round the tea-table and the fire, stood a young girl with her face pressed against the window. It was a cold, melancholy afternoon, and outside a heavy white fog was gathering over the frost-bitten grounds, making a fine contrast to the gay and cheery scene within-doors. Suddenly she turned with a cynical little laugh from the window. "What a fool I am!" said the girl to herself. "I have been standing at that cold window for exactly twenty minutes. And for what reason? Because Dr. Brooke chose to go out for a walk over the moors on a particularly impossible day, and hasn't come back yet. Is that a reason why I should go without my tea, not to mention the awful possibility of catching a cold in my head, and having a red nose?—Oh, thanks, Captain Egerton, I should like some tea, awfully"—and repeating the last sentence aloud, Alison Bligh came forward into the fire-light.

Even in the flickering fire-rays she revealed herself as a very striking girl. There was an unmistakable touch of sensuousness in the full lips, and in the clear-cut nostrils, which were the best part of a nose which was somewhat too thick for a woman, and in the fine curves of her shoulders and bust. But intellect was not wanting, as her broad, well-marked forehead proved; nor determination, which was revealed in the square lines of her jaw and chin; nor a certain amount of ideality, which looked out of her somewhat dreamy eyes—dark, Southern eyes which were in direct contradiction to the twists of pale red-gold hair which crowned her head. In sum, a very dangerous young woman, whom Lady Minton was wont to declare she would not trust with her own husband, although Sir Francis was past seventy, and a pattern of the conjugal virtues.

Miss Bligh felt her spirits rise suddenly as she took her place in the cheery circle round the fire, and she smiled when she thought of her watch by the window just now. How cold and miserable she had felt—how ridiculous to have ceded to such a sentimental impulse! That was not her way either; she, who had long ago made up her mind to snatch every moment of happiness—every pleasurable emotion even—that life could offer her. And then the soft voice of Lady Minton was heard saying, "Alison, when you have quite finished with Captain Egerton and those muffins, pass them both on. And do, like a dear child, sing us something."

Miss Bligh thereupon sprang up and went to the open piano.

"I will sing you," she said gravely, "a little romance which I heard once at the Variétés. I believe it has a moral. Judic used to sing it;" and striking up a quaint accompaniment, she sang some words familiar enough on the Boulevards.

While the room was echoing with plaudits on her rather risky performance, the door opened and a man of about five-and-thirty came in and sat down in a rocking-chair at the far end of the room.

"Awfully good, by Jove!" cried Captain Egerton, who was leaning on the piano. "I could have sworn

it was Judic herself, only you aren't fat, you know." The last part of the gallant captain's sentence was a tender whisper intended for Miss Bligh's ear alone, but, like many other soft speeches, was perfectly audible to the rest of the room. Dr. Brooke frowned as he moved from his seat near the door and, coming forward into the fire-light, asked Lady Minton for a cup of tea.

"So glad you're back, doctor! We all thought you were lost on Exmoor," said Lady Minton, purring over her guest as she poured him out some tea.

"Yes, we were all looking forward to seeing you brought home stiffly frozen on a shutter!" cried Alison, who seemed in the highest spirits. Had she forgotten her impatient watch by the window only half an hour before?

"Ah, the gods don't love me. I shall not die young," said the doctor, whose keen eyes were riveted on her face. Then the party broke up into small groups, and it was either by choice or chance that she found herself, only a few minutes later, standing alone with him at the same window at which she had watched half an hour before.

"I am glad you are back," she said at last, half-shyly, as the young man stood and gazed at her in the dusk.

"Are you? You knew I was out, then?"

"Yes."

"None of the others missed me, I should imagine. They were playing some game which looked uncommonly like 'kiss-in-the-ring' when I left. Were you one of that lot?"

"Oh, no. I have been in my room all the afternoon."

"Thank Heaven for that!"

Alison smiled at the fervour of his tone.

"Would you have minded much if I had been 'one of that lot'?"

The doctor frowned. "I should have been rather—disappointed. I should have thought very little of you if you had."

"Well—I wasn't. But I am afraid it is not a sense of the outraged proprieties which kept me from playing 'kiss-in-the-ring' in the hall. If it could possibly have amused me, I should have done so. I believe in amusing oneself. But somehow or other, that sort of thing doesn't entertain me. Perhaps I am too old—or not old enough; anyhow, I don't care for the infantine pastimes which are the fashion now. I suppose when I am getting on for forty I shall like them."

"No, I don't think you ever will," said Brooke, smiling down at her charming upturned face.

"But I am afraid you don't understand me," she said quickly; "you think me better than I am. I have no moral aim, no aspirations, nothing of that kind. I simply enjoy the present. I suppose, if I wanted to pose, I should call myself an Epicurean. It is strange, but 'to-morrow' has absolutely no meaning for me; I believe in 'to-day.' I mean to enjoy every hour of my life. After all, what do we know of 'to-morrow'? Nothing. But we do know that roses are divine!" And pulling a hot-house flower from her waist-belt, the girl pressed it, with a pretty, unconventional gesture, to her lips.

"At that rate," said the doctor, "if you were to have

some great misfortune—to lose all your money, for instance, or catch the small-pox—you would have very little to fall back upon. You might feel the want of 'the consolations of religion.'"

"No, I don't think I should. If any great unhappiness," she added dreamily, "were ever to befall me, I should not want to live. I did not ask to come into the world, and why, forsooth, should I not go when I am tired of it? Life, after all, is very like a party to which some one else has insisted on our going. If we are bored, we are surely not bound to wait till the very end. We leave when we please."

Dr. Brooke looked steadily at her.

"You are a very strange girl, Miss Bligh. Not one woman in a thousand would dare to say such a thing as that. But I think you are right. There are cases when death is a release from torture, mental and bodily."

"How did we get on to such a lugubrious topic?" said Alison, shivering slightly, and turning away from the dark landscape.

There was a pause, and then the young man said suddenly—

"Why did you sing that song just now?"

"I—don't know," said Alison, with drooping eyes.

"Do you know what it means?"

"Do you?" she said, raising her eyebrows innocently.

"I walked the hospitals in Paris for two years. I understood every word."

"Oh, I am sorry. I thought, with my accent, and an English audience, that I should be perfectly safe."

"Don't do it again," he said; "for Heaven's sake don't. You can't imagine how dreadful it is to see you do a thing like that."

"I never will," she said suddenly, her face flushing scarlet from brow to chin.

"Thank you for saying that," he answered gravely. "Sing something for *me*, now, will you?"

Miss Bligh answered by moving away to the piano. Brooke stood still by the window, looking out over the snow-covered grounds, and waiting to hear what she would sing. Alison's fingers strayed tentatively over the keys as if seeking the strain which suited her mood best. Presently her clear young voice was heard in Handel's immortal air—"Lascia ch'io pianga."

"Handel, instead of Boulevard songs," Duncan Brooke smiled to himself. "That will do. Alison loves me. I know it—I can see it in her eyes."

II.

It was a passionate yet half-paternal feeling that Dr. Brooke had for this beautiful girl; a feeling akin to that which the tiger cherishes towards its cub, and yet with a yearning tenderness too. He felt that he would gladly have thrown away his life to save her pain, but as it was, he meant to devote his life to her pleasure. Nothing should be spared that could give her a moment's happiness—this little Epicurean who believed so devoutly in the Now! There was nothing, too, which could stand in the way of an immediate marriage. Duncan Brooke had already made a brilliant reputation and a large practice, and Alison being an orphan with a fortune of

her own, there would be no difficulties about their settling down at once. His house in Grosvenor Street was a fair-sized one, and with Alison's taste in furniture and pictures, might be made one of the prettiest in London. He smiled as he saw a vision of her radiant face at the head of his dinner-table, smiling at his guests, perfect in her young matronhood. Somehow he always thought of her in connection with beautiful and pleasant things; with flowers, and pictures, and music, and the sparkle of dinner-table wit. She had told him that day that she loved roses; well, she should have roses on her table every day of the year. And then Brooke remembered that pearls were another hobby of Alison's. He would telegraph to town to-morrow for the finest necklace he could get.

That night, when Lady Minton had sent her maid away, a pink-robed figure knocked at her door and knotted a pair of soft arms tight round her neck.

"My dear child, what *is* the matter?" she gasped in the midst of this impetuous embrace.

"It's all settled—and I'm so happy!"

"Indeed," said Lady Minton, laughing. "And may I ask who is the lucky man?"

"Oh, Dr. Brooke, of course. How can you ask?"

"My dear, all the men in the house are mad about you. I listen to their confidences—you know my way."

"Well, you shan't be bored with any more, you dear thing. Please let them know that I'm the happiest woman in the world!"

III.

A week later Lady Minton and two or three of her guests stood at the hall door to see the doctor and Miss Bligh mount the dog-cart for a drive. Lady Minton was profuse in her advice. "Now mind you take care of Alison, doctor. That mare is rather frisky, and the roads are slippery to-day. You've got to bring Alison back safe and sound. We don't want to have a 'case' for you down here."

The doctor smiled as Miss Bligh came down the wide oaken staircase. A week's happiness had changed a handsome girl into a young goddess. In her tight-fitting manly garments and the soft furs at her throat, she looked the personification of youth. Her eyes—always fine—seemed twice as large, and had acquired a soft expression which was irresistible; the cynical little laugh, which had formerly been one of her characteristics, had disappeared.

Another two minutes, and the girl was snugly tucked under a fur rug on the front seat of the high dog-cart, and Brooke, touching the mare with his whip, sent her flying down the long carriage-drive.

"How ridiculously those two people are in love with each other!" said Lady Minton with a little sigh. "Upon my word, it is quite Arcadian. I wonder how long it will last?"

"About six months, I take it," drawled Captain Eger-ton; "at least, I hope so. Miss Bligh absolutely won't look at any other fellow than Saw-bones. But it can't last, that sort of thing. Quite uncivilised, you know."

"Well, they are to be married in six weeks,"

laughed Lady Minton. "So this time next year we shall see you 'making the running' with the beautiful Mrs. Brooke?"

"Nothing more likely in the world," replied Captain Eger-ton, who had a royal idea of his own powers of fascination.

At the luncheon-table two chairs were vacant. "I wonder where our two young people have got to?" said Lady Minton. "I wish Dr. Brooke would not take her these long expeditions, it makes me very uneasy."

"They are probably lunching somewhere *à deux*, dear Lady Minton," suggested the "frisky matron" of the party.

"I don't know where they will lunch out on Exmoor—and I don't feel at all sure about that mare. She is getting a regular jade."

The afternoon closed in, and there were still no signs of the girl and her lover. Tea had been brought in, and Lady Minton was trying to hide her growing alarm as she chatted with her guests and did the honours of the tea-table.

"I am sure I heard wheels at the front of the house," she said suddenly.

"Yes, but it is not the dog-cart," said Captain Eger-ton; "those were cart-wheels I heard."

"Go out and see what it is, for goodness' sake. No carts ever come up to the Court after dusk!"

The young man hurried out of the room, and a minute later a scared footman came and whispered to Lady Minton. Hurrying into the hall she was met by Eger-ton and Brooke. The doctor's face was destitute of every vestige of colour, and his eyes seemed to have sunk back far into his head.

"There has been a bad accident——"

"Where is Alison?" cried Lady Minton; "she is not——"

"No; not dead. But she is very seriously injured. Can you bear the worst?"

"Take me to her—my poor darling!" wailed Lady Minton.

"We have carried her here, into Sir Francis' study; and she must not be moved any more. Don't look at her face, Lady Minton. I want you to be strong—to help me."

A motionless heap lay on the sofa, and that heap was Alison Bligh. Piteous groans came from her lips, and one side of her face was carefully bound up with a man's white silk handkerchief.

"Make up a bed quickly here. Call her maid—if she has strong nerves—to help you take off her clothes. I can tell you nothing definite till I have examined her. Bring some brandy."

These orders were briefly given by the doctor as he hurried from the room to fetch his case of surgical instruments.

An hour later the worst was known. The girl's spine was so badly injured that she would never be able to rise again. One side of her face had been so terribly crushed that she was hardly recognisable, and her sufferings were acute. She might live, the doctor thought, but her life would be so many years of mental and bodily anguish.

IV.

The house-party at Minton Court broke up immediately, and by noon the next day the last carriageful of guests had swept down the drive. Silence reigned in the large rambling house, Lady Minton and Miss Bligh's maid taking their turn in the sick-room. As for Duncan Brooke, he hardly left his patient's bed-side. Always a reticent man, not even his hostess ever guessed what he suffered during those long days and nights of anxious watching. At night, particularly, he would let no one else sit up with her, even if he snatched an hour or two's sleep during the day. For a whole fortnight she lay almost unconscious on the bed, unable to articulate, and only showing by her low groans that she was still alive—and suffering.

Then came a change, and Alison was able to speak again. One day the doctor was alone with her in the room where they had laid her down on the day of the accident. The great house was hushed into perfect stillness, and not a sound was to be heard but the occasional fall of a cinder on the hearth.

"Duncan," she whispered suddenly, with a weary little sigh.

"What is it, my darling?" said the doctor, bending his head to listen.

"I—I want to go to sleep."

"So you shall, dear. I will give you an opiate to-night."

"Oh, but I want to go to sleep for—always. I *cannot* bear it any more. It is all over for me now; all over, and I am only twenty-two! I should go mad, chained to a bed all the years I may have to live . . . And you would learn to hate me—how could you help it? I know I am a horrible, maimed mass, although you have never let me see my face since . . . Oh, Duncan, and the pain! I cannot bear it. I always hated pain; I am sure I feel it more than other people do. And what I suffer now," she added fiercely, "is inhuman! What have I done that I should have to bear this terrible agony? We would not let a dog suffer what you all look on and see me endure! Oh, it is cruel—cruel!"

"Alison, I would give my life to save you one pang."

"Would you?" she said eagerly. "I know you are brave and good. Have you the courage to help me now? Oh, Duncan! when you give me that chloral to-night, give me enough to send me to sleep for always. No one will ever know. Oh, my darling, do me this one last service!"

"I cannot do it," he whispered back, some inward voice telling him, even as he spoke the words, that here was the merciful euthanasia for this poor maimed girl. He knew that her life—even if she lived—would be henceforward a martyrdom, and that never again would she rise from her "mattress grave."

As night closed in Alison grew worse. She was evidently suffering frightfully. "I shall not leave her an instant to-night," said Brooke to Lady Minton, who stood with scared, white face at the bedside. "I cannot tell what may happen," he added at the door,

having persuaded his hostess to take an hour or two's rest. "She might succumb now—from the shock—or she might live for years. I shall give her a strong opiate to-night. She must have sleep."

"Thank Heaven for one thing," said Lady Minton, "and that is, that you are able to be with her—that you are here in the house. Think if we had been obliged to rely on the local practitioner! It is simply a mercy that you are here."

"A mercy?" repeated the doctor gravely. "Yes; perhaps it is."

When day dawned the house was all astir. Swiftly moving figures hurried up and down stairs, and the doctor, meeting Lady Minton in the cold grey light at the door of the sick-room, took her hand and led her away.

"Alison is gone," he whispered. "She passed away last night without pain. I was with her; she died in my arms."

"Poor darling! It is a merciful release," sobbed the kind-hearted woman.

"Yes, a merciful release," repeated Brooke, pressing his hostess's hand.

Next day Lady Minton went with a sinking heart to the doctor's door. He had locked himself in ever since Alison's death, and had refused all food, on the plea that he wished to sleep; but she found him sitting dressed at his writing-table, having obviously never been to bed. Some medical books and sheets of manuscript lay about, and he seemed to be writing.

"I am so pained, Dr. Brooke, to speak of anything connected with this awful affair, but you know there are the usual formalities to be observed. Poor Alison had no near relations living, so we must arrange all the last sad offices. Here is the registrar's certificate. Will you, as you were her only medical attendant, fill in the—cause of death?"

"The cause of death?" cried Brooke, rising from his chair. "I—I—cannot say—how should I know?" he shouted, throwing up his hands.

The next instant he was lying in a senseless heap on the floor.

* * * * *

Six months after, the following paragraph appeared in an evening paper:—

"A HERO OF THE HOSPITAL.—Once more one of our most eminent physicians has proved that heroism is not confined to the winners of the Victoria Cross. It is with the deepest regret that we record the untimely death of Dr. Duncan Brooke, of Grosvenor Street, physician to the Whitechapel Hospital. It appears that an in-patient—a boy of eleven years of age—was suffering from acute diphtheria. The physicians agreed that there was a chance of saving the child's life if the operation of tracheotomy could be successfully performed. It will be remembered that in this operation the putrid and poisonous matter has to be sucked by the operator through a tube. In spite of the opposition of the other doctors, Dr. Brooke insisted on performing the operation, which was highly successful, the boy being now nearly convalescent. Dr. Brooke, who, it appears, received a severe mental shock some six months ago, was taken ill shortly afterwards, and expired this morning in the hospital. Deceased was widely known and highly respected."

E. HEPWORTH DIXON.