

OR,
FOR HER
FATHER'S
POINT OF HONOR;
BY ANNIE EDWARDS.

CHAPTER XII. 14
Continued.

You may imagine the mental condition of the vicar—a man so many years past his youth; incredulous to a morbid degree respecting his own powers of pleasing, and possessing a perfectly accurate knowledge as to the very airy and unsubstantial foundation upon which his best hopes were, in reality, based!

"I don't think the flowers are looking ill, Jane. I think it is yourself that is changed. You don't care for your flowers now as you did a year ago."

"I don't care for my flowers!" Her hands ceased from their employment in an instant, and she turned full around to the vicar. "Why, Mr. Follett, I think they are all I do care for now. What have I left to care for but my own poor, small, selfish pleasures, and—"

Was that sudden hesitation propitious? The vicar deluded himself into thinking so.

"And what else, Jane? What else do you care for, except your own poor, small, selfish pleasures?"

"A memory, sir," looking straight into his eyes. "Not much, you will say, to live upon, but still all I have got, you know, all I have got!"

And then she turned away and began abruptly to walk up and down with quick, short steps, along the garden path. A habit that had rather grown upon her since Miss Lynch's death, as many such mechanical means for the suppression of thought do grow upon persons in whose minds ghosts walk at times, and who live much alone.

Mr. Follett watched her as she took two or three of these short turns in silence; then he met her midway in the path.

"Jane, child, I don't like to see you walk like that. That walk is the feverish action of one whose mind is ill at ease. I would not have your mind so, Jane, if I could help it."

The expression of his face quite melted her. She held out both her hands to him.

"Oh, sir, how good you are to me!—what should I do without you? When—when some thoughts come to me, you know, I begin to walk like this, without thinking what I do; but I will try never to walk again, as you don't like it. The trick came upon me a night or two after auntie died, and I can scarcely help it now. I would not do that or anything else in the world to give you a moment's pain."

The pressure of her hands was warm; real honest regard shone from her eyes; and from one ordinarily so cold any expression of feeling ought to have made an aspirant lover rapturous. But the vicar felt chilled as though a harsh December wind had suddenly swept upon him, standing there among the summer roses. It is one thing to write of the influence of kindly hands and eyes, and another to feel it. Mr. Follett was sensible that no woman ever caught the hands and looked into the eyes of the man she loved as Jane was doing now. She was grateful, dutiful, affectionate to him, as to a father—no more.

He hid his embarrassment, and disengaged himself from her cruelly kind hands by stooping down and picking up one of her gardening gloves. As he presented it, he remarked, quite in his usual collected tone—indeed, it struck on Jane's heart he spoke a little formally—that he always recommended persons who lived much alone to break themselves early from all the habits that loneliness engenders. He had had a great deal of experience himself that way, and he knew how apt all thoughts were to fall into habits and routines unless those of other people, unless they early forced themselves to associate with the world about them.

"I feel that, too," said Miss Grand—"I feel that it will not take a great many more years to make me as genteel and unlike any one else, as old Miss Brown. And do you know, Mr. Follett, I sometimes wonder if it isn't a duty I owe to myself to give up this lonely life and try—a terrible effort it would be—to bring myself to live with others."

If ever a man had an opening made for him, here surely was one. Without waiting to think, the vicar broke forth into speech—hurried, disconnected speech very unlike any that Jane had ever heard from his lips.

"Jane, that is what I have often wished to say to you. You are too young to have done with life. It is monstrous that you should waste your best years over one lost hope. You do owe it to yourself to try to be happier and live in the world, and—and, Jane, a single woman cannot mix in the world—in marriage you might forget the past—and be happy!"

It was the vaguest declaration of passion probably ever made; but from the fearful agitation of the vicar's heart, he, beyond all doubt, meant it for one. For Jane, she simply looked at him in ghast.

"Marriage!" she exclaimed—"marriage? Great Heaven! Mr. Follett, don't misunderstand me so! I meant to live in a family, a family containing other staid persons of my own years, and you speak as if I wished to change my state. So much do the best of such know of women!" she added mournfully. "So much do you, after all these years, know of me? Why, sir, I have never had a thought of such things. I have never sought to be seen, even, or to meet any living man since the day—the day when Gifford left me; and now that I am young no longer, you speak to me of finding happiness in loving some one but him! You meant well, Mr. Follett, you meant well—but you don't know me, even after all these years!"

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As he spoke a strange light came across Miss Grand's face. She forgot Mr. Follett, forgot that he had wounded her pride, that he was speaking bitterly to her or speaking at all. Gifford was returning, the dream of her life—Gifford, broken and weary, returning to her—was to come true. Her eyes filled and sank to the ground; her lips trembled; a faint color rose up in her cheeks. For a few moments the years of heavy pain seemed lifted from her, and she was a girl again, listening at the little wicket for Mohun's step in the twilight; a few moments, then she remembered Mr. Follett, and that if she was going to shed any more foolish tears of joy it would be discreeter to escape and shed them alone than to weep here with him for an audience.

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"Jane—let us be friends again."

This was all his explanation of the past or promise for the future; but the sound of his voice, of his footsteps, was enough to unlock the whole long frozen love of Miss Grand's heart. She made no show of coldness, no concealment of what she felt at receiving him back to her again.

"Gifford—ah, Gifford! I have waited so long for you!"

And then she took his hands and led him to the place where they had used to sit beside the window, and looked into his face, and I regret to say—cried over him, as mothers sometimes do over very prodigal sons who are given back to them; and Mohun's pardon for the cruelty of seven years was sealed.

It must have been a somewhat strange feeling for him, a feeling strange from its freshness and yet haunting sense of perfect familiarity, to be sitting here in this same little, low raftered parlor—the same picture before him on the wall, the same china bowl upon the shelf, the same voluptuous sweetness from the overhanging tea roses without—all just as it had been seven years ago, when he used to sit here with his arm around Jane hour after hour of those delicious summer evenings of his youth. All as it had been, except Jane Grand herself; and she—how fearfully changed!

During the first hour that they were together Mohun could scarcely bring himself away from one idea—the change on Jane's face. He had expected to see her somewhat altered, of course, but for a woman to have so utterly aged at eight-and-twenty, only his own age, gave him a shock that was positively painful. He had known many women as fresh at eight-and-twenty as at eighteen, or if not actually as fresh, as charming in all the subtler graces and matured and experienced beauty; and Jane looked all but middle-aged.

Perhaps Mr. Mohun forgot, what Jane Grand's life had been during the last seven years, the amount of suffering she had gone through as compared

with that of the well wearing charming being with whom he mentally placed her at such disadvantage. For a woman to look young long two things are necessary—first, an infantine mien of cast of features; secondly, a great capacity for feeling nothing acutely. And Jane possessed neither of these. Her fragile, oval face was one sure, even in a far happier life than hers had been, to lose its youth early. The fine complexion of her younger days had alone saved her from looking too frail and delicate even when she was quite a young girl, and this she had wholly and forever lost within a very few days of the ending of her engagement to Mohun. She was pale, more than pale, bloodless-looking now. The blue veins were painfully distinct upon her thin temples; a faint violet shade around her eyes gave them an unearthly look of size and luster; her lips, so scarlet when Gifford kissed them last, were colorless and wan. The seven years which had brought Mohun to the best stage of a man's life, to the fullness of mature youth, had brought Miss Grand almost to the confines of age.

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"I have never sought to be seen by or to meet living man since the day that Gifford left me."

He, the Vicar of Chesterford, clasped, palpably with Huntley, the married doctor, or Mr. Gillett of the mill, or any other aged man of the parish who happened to wear a coat instead of a gown! He felt horribly, intensely bitter towards her. He thought he hated her. He thought her faithfulness to Gifford the obstinate, stiff-necked fancy of a fool. He thought her declaration of it to himself indelicate, vain, heartless; and, under the influence of these genial feelings, he broke out into the following speech:

"I beg your pardon for what I have said, Jane—I beg your pardon for believing your heart to have the slightest need of support or affection. As you justly say, you have never seen or been seen by any one worthy to receive your love since Mr. Mohun left. Fortunately, as you are so averse to the thought of marrying, you are now again to have a neighbor from whom you will know you have nothing but a friend's regard to fear. Mr. Gifford Mohun is coming back, Jane! I am here at this moment for the express purpose of telling you. Gifford Mohun is coming back to recruit, if possible, some of his shattered fortunes by living quietly at Yaton. I hope you will pardon my unintentional offense, now that I have given you this exceeding good news of the prodigal's return."

As he spoke a strange light came across Miss Grand's face. She forgot Mr. Follett, forgot that he had wounded her pride, that he was speaking bitterly to her or speaking at all. Gifford was returning, the dream of her life—Gifford, broken and weary, returning to her—was to come true. Her eyes filled and sank to the ground; her lips trembled; a faint color rose up in her cheeks. For a few moments the years of heavy pain seemed lifted from her, and she was a girl again, listening at the little wicket for Mohun's step in the twilight; a few moments, then she remembered Mr. Follett, and that if she was going to shed any more foolish tears of joy it would be discreeter to escape and shed them alone than to weep here with him for an audience.

As she raised her eyes, however, faltering out something about the suddenness of the news and the way in which it had overmastered her she found that she was already alone. There are probably few men generous enough to appreciate the charm of blushing called forth by thoughts of an old lover immediately after the rejection of themselves; and the Vicar of Chesterford did not, with all his virtues, possess the superhuman qualities requisite for such self-abnegation. He had turned abruptly away at the first faint color that rose into poor Jane's delighted, downcast face, and at this moment (bitter at his own folly in having spoken of love at all, bitter at Miss Grand for her unwilling refusal of his suit, and trebly bitter against himself for his own last ungenerous speech to her) was making his way back to the vicarage fierce and fast beneath the sultry morning sun.

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