

little housemaid says
now is the time for
that carpet



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"I must either speak to you or go mad!"
The girl ran recklessly to the window.
"Tom!"
"Miss Harding?"
"Will you swear—to me—that you are innocent?"
But Tom was gone. She heard him treading viciously on the dark veranda. A moment later Daintree found her deeply engrossed before the chart. She wanted to know what the sly meant. He told her in a tender whisper.
"What a beautiful idea!"
"Well, it wasn't mine."
"Whose was it?"
"My servant's; he made her, and he moved her on each day. You would have said he was the lucky fellow himself!"

CHAPTER XXIX.
THE breeze had freshened; there were white wisps in the blue above and tiny crests upon the blue below. It was early morning, and Tom, having waited admirably overnight, was setting the breakfast table when his master came in glowing from the morning dip. As a rule they bathed together; this exception was their first. They had not spoken since the previous evening, but here was Daintree in a glow for more causes than salt water and fresh air, and a glance told the other that he was forgiven.

"Well, Thomas, will you listen to me another time? Neither lady has the slightest idea who you are."
"I am thankful to hear you say so," said Tom, laying the knives.
"Lady Starkie never set eyes on you before. I feel certain that Miss Harding doesn't know you from Adam. Don't you think it was rather vain of you to imagine that she would?"
"I was afraid of it, sir," said Tom; "that was all."
"And very natural, too," said his master kindly. "I quite enter into your embarrassment and only fear I said more than I meant in the heat of the moment last night. You must forgive me, Thomas. It was unpleasant for you, I admit, but you won't mind another day of it, will you? One more day will end it—for the present."

The swarthy countenance was more radiant than ever. Tom was nonplussed.
"Only one more day?"
"For the present," repeated Daintree. "The ladies return to Sydney this afternoon. They go to the Pulteney. Shall I tell you why—shall I tell you why?"
And now one man was on fire, but the other felt a chill run down him as he nodded his head. He could not speak.

"Because it's to be at once!" cried Daintree, beside himself with joy. "Because a special license is to be had by paying for it, so why on earth should we wait for banns? My boy, we shall be married by the end of the week. Only think of it! I can't believe it myself. It's weeks sooner than I dared to hope. But women are all alike. The very best of 'em, Thomas, will take you by surprise if they can. What do you think? I'd tell this to no other living man. When I met her on board no day was too distant, and before we said good night it couldn't be too soon!"

The fine eyes glistened; the deep voice shook. There was no doubt about this man's love. But Tom was thinking of his darker side, and it had never seemed so dark before, for never before had he allowed himself to dwell upon it without shame. Now this was a duty. The point of view was changed, and the regrettable in Tom's benefactor became the intolerable in Claire's husband. Could she be happy with so dangerous a combination of the spoilt child and the unscrupulous tyrant? Would she be safe? Tom sweated with the thought. It was horribly entangled with that of his debt to Daintree. Yet for all that was in his heart the fitting and conventional speech passed his lips, and he found himself shaking the other by the hand.

"Congratulate me?" cried Daintree. "I should think you did! You have only to see her to know how happy she will make me. She is a sweet, true, unselfish girl. She has beauty and goodness and strong common sense. She can appreciate and admire and understand. She is the poet's ideal. I have been longing for her all my life. And then her manner! She will be a leader of society when I come to my own. Yes, Thomas, you may well congratulate me. She is going to make me the very happiest of men. I can see her now—friend of the wits, patroness of all the arts, gracious queen of an ideal salon—when the exile returns to his own."

And doubtless he could also see himself—as Tom could see him—swelling with happiness and pride and satisfaction. Her happiness he appeared to take for granted. It might be unfair to say that he never thought of it at all, but he very seldom spoke of it even to Claire.
Tom was in and out at breakfast. He contrived to be out as much as possible. Her face tortured him. He saw marks like bruises beneath the lustrous eyes that never looked his way. He noted the nervous effort of her conversation while he was present. But after breakfast, when he must have met her face to face on the veranda, she turned her back upon him in a manner not only pointed, but barbed. And for awhile his compassion deserted him altogether.
Claire was indeed not herself. Her indisposition became more and more transparent, and when she ultimately confessed to a perfectly sleepless night Daintree put it down to her great happiness and was the first to insist that she should "run away and rest" till luncheon. Lady Starkie, on the other hand, made herself extremely comfortable, quite dotting on the harbor and Rose bay, while she declared that she had seldom felt better in her life. Nevertheless when her host began reading her his poems a faintness overcame the lady before he had got very far. It was quite inexplicable and most disappointing. But she feared that both Claire and herself were still suffering from the effects of the atrocious table on board that horrible ship. So Lady Starkie followed Claire upstairs, with the poems, which she took care to leave there when she came down again.
It was a little hard on Daintree, but he was now much too happy to be readily depressed or vexed. His rampant spirits sought relief in activity, and he galloped off to Sydney to secure rooms at the Pulteney hotel.
Tom was meantime behind the scenes. So was Peggy O'Brien, and already those keen Irish eyes had seen more than he thought, for hopeless love had fitted them with strong lenses, even as his triumphant suit had blinded her master to every passion but his own. The girl had long divined that some other woman stood between herself and Tom, and there were more reasons than might appear for her instantly pouncing upon Miss Harding as the one.
Peggy was sure that Tom and Daintree must have known each other in England, or why were they more like brothers than master and man? Tom would not tell her, and the Fawcetts could not. So Peggy set them down as two old friends, and what if the friends had loved the same woman? The idea occurred to her when she saw Tom manipulating the cork ship and so zealously preparing for the bride. It was then an idea only. It became a suspicion on the evening of the bride's arrival, and Claire was not the only young woman who lay awake all that night.
The other had been transported for a comparatively venial offense and had come through the thick of her ordeal a better woman than most. She is not put forward as an average specimen of her sex and kind in that colony and at that time. The Irishwomen were almost invariably the best of a deplorable lot, and Peggy was certainly not the worst of the Irishwomen. But there was evil in her, and passion was to bring it out, as it had already brought out the good. A callous man she could bear with and wait for so long as he was callous and cold to all. But to see and hear him sighing for another woman—and that other woman there on the spot—was to lash a patient and single-hearted devotion into tumults of jealousy and bitter rage.
The thing galled her while it was still a suspicion. It maddened her when she knew it for a fact. And that was when, in the same half minute, she met Claire on the stairs in tears and saw Tom in his pantry with his head clasped tight between his hands. Peggy stole away without a word, and there was mischief in every noiseless step she took.
Her first thought was to tell Daintree. It she dismissed on consideration and tried making friends with the ladies' maid in order to acquire information. This young woman, however, could only talk of the fourth officer aboard the Rosamund, and it took Peggy half an hour to discover that she had never even seen Miss Harding before the voyage. So she knew nothing, and half the morning was gone, but Peggy was all the more determined to learn everything before the visitors left.
The master's departure on horseback at last inspired the way. Tom in the pantry was still listening to the clattering hoofs when Peggy opened the door.
"Oh, Tom, the master would like ye to chase out the boat for 'm when ye can find the time."
"Did he say so, Peggy?"
"Sure, he tould me not to tell ye, wid all the extra work ye've got, but he only wished it could be done."
"Then I'll set to work this minute."
"An' ye won't be tellin' 'm I tould ye?"
"No, I'll take all the credit if you like," said Tom in a voice and with a face which he took no pains to discipline for Peggy's benefit. Both supported her theory and hardened her in her plot. And as he reached the boat shed she was knocking at Miss Harding's door.
"Askin' yer pardon, miss, I think I know what would be better for you than lyin' down up here."
"What is that?"
"Lyin' in a hammock by the say."
"It sounds pleasant. Thank you very much, but I think I'll stay where I am."

"Sure, ye'd find one in the boat shed, an' it's all the good the air would do ye!"
"You are very kind," said Claire wearily. "But who would put the hammock up?"
"Masther's gone to Sydney," said Peggy reflectively, "an' he won't have me meddlin' wid such things. Wait till I tell ye, miss. Go this minute, an' you'll find Thomas in the boat shed 'a'aulin' the boat. He'll have 't up in a twinkie."
"Well, I'll see," Claire had colored.
"Will I tell 'm, miss?"
"No, I'll see. I think I would rather be where I am."
Peggy withdrew. In three minutes she heard the young lady coming downstairs. In two more she was herself outside the shed, crouching between timber and shrubs and sand and sky.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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