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DATELESS BARGAIN

A NOVEL

BY
C. L. PIRKIS
AUTHOR OF "LADY LOVELACE," "JUDITH WYNNE," ETC.

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1887

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A DATELESS BARGAIN.

CHAPTER I.

"LOCK the door, Mab, then we can begin to turn things upside down in comfort. Now what room in the house is most unlike a study?"

"Is it a conundrum," laughed Mab; "or do you wish for a straightforward answer? It wants thinking over. A housekeeper's room, perhaps, or a kitchen—"

"Oh, what unrefined notions you have! If you had asked me, I should have said a lady's boudoir. You get your inspiration from your brown holland sleeves and apron. Look at yourself in the glass. What a splendid housemaid was lost in you!"

These two young people gossiping so gaily on a bright May morning were Mabel and Joscelyn Shenstone, only children of Irving Shenstone, one of the largest landowners in the county of Gloucestershire. He was expected home on this day from a ten days' visit to London, and his daughters were preparing a welcome for him in his sanctum by turning things generally upside down.

"We want to leave the mark of our presence in the room," Joscelyn had informed her mother over the breakfast-table that morning, "so that when father sits down and kicks off his boots—as he always does in his study—he will say, 'Mab did that, I'll swear, and Joyce made that other lovely arrangement.'"

These sisters, in appearance, were like and unlike each other as only sisters can be. They were each of them tall, slender girls, with well-shaped heads, a profusion of dark brown hair, and large hazel-gray eyes. But here all likeness ended; for the truth must be told, Joyce was one of the handsomest girls the county could boast of, while Mab stood close upon the border of plainness. Joyce's complexion was that of a brilliant brunette, while Mab was unmis-

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takably sallow. Joyce had the straightest and prettiest of Grecian noses, a small mouth all dimples and curves; Mab's nose was somewhat aquiline, her mouth wide and innocent of dimples and curves. Joyce's general expression was one of buoyant happiness; Mab, as a rule, wore so deep a look of intellectual thought as to amount almost to melancholy, or, to speak exactly, of anxious apprehension.

It was characteristic of these sisters that while Mab was attired in the neatest of black gowns, which she had furthermore essayed to protect from dust by thoroughly congruous holland apron and housemaid's sleeves, Joyce's sole preparation for her morning's mimic housewifery had been to pin back her pretty cambric skirt into one graceful fold behind, thereby disclosing in front her dainty slippers and slender ankles.

Mab took a long, steady look at herself in the mirror.

"I think I must be a born housemaid; I always feel so thoroughly at home with a dusting-brush in my hand," she began, musingly.

But Joyce was not at all in a mood for either musing or attitudinizing that morning.

"Well, then, begin and use it, my dear, as if you were 'to the manner born,'" she replied, laughingly, giving Mab a little push in the direction of the writing-table, which stood at right-angles to the glass. "You set to work on the ink-bottles; empty them every one —you know I'm going to turn them all into flower-vases—while I attack the book-shelves."

Mab made a little demur.

"It doesn't seem the right thing to do with ink-bottles, and where—where shall I throw the ink?"

"Oh, you want so much telling! You a housemaid, indeed! Why, out of the window, of course; never mind about the flowers underneath. Now, a clever maid would have jumped at that idea before I could have spoken."

Mab made another demur, muttering something to the effect "that it wasn't exactly the sort of work a housemaid would have given to her." It was, however, a very little demur, for, although Joyce was nearly two years younger than Mab, she invariably acted the elder sister, and Mab was, so to speak, completely "under her thumb."

So splash, splash, went bottle after bottle of ink from the window on the flower-bed beneath.

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"It will dye those pansies a magnificent blue-black," laughed Joyce, hard at work at her book-shelves. "Old Donovan will throw up his hands in admiration when he comes round next with his watering-pot. Look here, Mab, here's a whole row of books on farming, cattle-rearing, and such like nonsense. Shall I turn them all the wrong way—upside down, that is—or with their backs to the wall?"

"I think you might let the books alone, Joyce."

"Good gracious! What for? Why, books are the first thing to be thought of in a study. If I let the books alone, what may I touch? Ah, I've an idea! I'll rummage about for some poetry-books; there are sure to be a lot behind somewhere, or on the upper shelves, and I'll push back all the dreadfully useful books and put all the poetry in front. Now, won't that be splendid? Oh, good gracious, good gracious!" This in an utterly surprised tone. "Here are heaps upon heaps of poetry-books! Why, there's Shelley, Keats, Coleridge, Shakespeare! Oh, no end of Shakespeare; a dozen volumes at least. Who would have thought that father had ever in his whole life been an admirer of the poets? These books have every one of them his name on the fly-leaf in his own writing!"

Mab left her writing-table all in a hurry.

"I thought it! I knew it!" she said, excitedly. "I felt certain father had been all but a poet before he went in so much for farming and that sort of thing; and I know I'm right in never opening a book of poetry—" she stopped herself abruptly.

Joyce turned upon her amazed.

"Why—why shouldn't you read poetry, if you like?" she cried. "That's it! I know you're acting up to some funny notion you've taken into your head. You've given up music, you've given up painting, you are always doing plain needlework, or poring over housekeeping books. What does it mean? What's the idea, Mab?"

Mab went back to her writing-table.

"Look, Joyce," she said, quietly, "I've emptied all the ink-bottles. Now, don't you think we ought to begin getting the flowers? Shall I go and ask Donovan to cut a basket-full?" Which remark, it will be seen, was in no sort an answer to Joyce's question.

It served, however, to divert her attention.

"Ask Donovan?" she cried. "Are you out of your mind? Why, if we went down on our knees to him he wouldn't give us

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more than a handful of the commonest garden-flowers and just a few very full-blown azaleas, with very short stalks, out of one of the hot-houses. No, thank you; I'm going out to help myself this time, and I shall come back with armfuls of everything—tulips, hyacinths —everything that's spring-like and delicious. Oh, the dust!" Here a fit of sneezing prevented further exclamation.

Whereupon Mab volunteered her services.

"Let me finish those book-shelves while you get the flowers. You only want all the poetry in front, and the farming-books pushed back, so that father won't be able to lay his hand upon anything he wants. Isn't that it?" she asked, setting to work briskly on the volumes.

A door opening off this little study led, by a flight of steps, straight into the garden, now, thanks to a singularly sunny month of May, in the full glory of its spring blossoming.

Down these steps went Joyce with the biggest pair of scissors she could find. Back again in something under five minutes she came, with a nosegay so huge she was compelled to hold her dress-skirt in either hand to help carry it into the room.

She deposited the flowers in a heap on the floor—snowy haw-thorn boughs, "deep tulips dashed with fiery dew, laburnums, drop-ping-wells of fire."

"There's a lot more coming," she cried, gleefully. "I came upon Kathleen just now, and told her to bring all the hyacinths in pots she could lay her hands upon. Ah, here she is!" This added as a remarkably pretty and, for her station, daintily-attired damsel appeared upon the scene burdened with two full-flowering hyacinths in pots.

This was Kathleen Donovan, the gardener's daughter, who acted as maid to the two young ladies. Hers was a face that in another sphere of life might have won for her a ducal coronet, or at least a dangerous reputation as a successful beauty. Not a faultlessly beautiful face, but a face so full of sparkle, of betwitching bright-ness, and changeful coquetry that one looked at it, and looked again, without having the remotest notion of what shape or size were the features, what color were eyes and hair. It was a typical Irish face, not the face one is accustomed to associate with orange baskets and green-and-red shawls, but rather with the harps and the Irish melo-dies, the breeze-blown Norah Creinas, and the sweet vales "where the bright waters meet." Her manner was Irish too—soft, arch,

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betwitching—though with an English veneer upon it, caught from constant daily contact with her young mistresses.

"Ever so many more, Kathleen," cried Joyce. "I am going to fill the fireplace with hyacinths. I want this room to be as unlike a study and as much like a bower as we can make it. Never mind what your father says, bring everything you can get hold of that has leaves and flowers."

Off went Kathleen; down went the two girls on their knees, breaking branchlets from the boughs of laburnum and hawthorn, arranging the big, yellow tulips against a plumed background of lilac, doing, in fact, their very utmost to convert this chosen seat of Minerva into a shrine fit for Flora herself.

"It's like desecration," murmured Mab, looking remorsefully toward the book-shelves, where the topsy-turvied volumes showed mournfully through a bowery arrangement of bright-tinted posies.

"It's consecration, you mean," cried Joyce. "These dry old walls have never held so much beauty before;" and on went her fingers faster than ever.

Her eyes sparkled, her curly hair strayed across her forehead, she sang merry little snatches of old-world ballads which a modern fashion has revived. Assuredly the May sun, after climbing the Mendips that morning, turning the forgotten battle-fields of old Gloucestershire into fields of "cloth of gold" with buttercups and celandine, could find no daintier work for its mid-day hours than throwing its light and its shadow on this blithe picture of Joyce Shenstone on the floor amid her bright, spring flowers.

Mab lifted up a finger.

"Hush! There's a step on the gravel," she said, not inaptly, in the middle of Joyce's carol that—

"Every fair has a sweetheart there,
And the fiddler's standing by."

Down went all Joyce's posies in a moment.

"It's Frank!" she cried, jumping to her feet.

And, before Mab could have counted ten on her fingers, she had flung down the garden steps, and might have been seen out there in the sunshine talking and laughing with a tall, dark young man of about six or eight-and-twenty. Now looking up into his face, now looking down at the pebbles at her feet, with bright, quick, happy glances and smiles that left no doubt as to the footing on which the two stood toward each other,

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For of course she had a lover—this gay, beautiful girl—and of course (equally as beseemed a gay, beautiful girl) he paired well with her. He was tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed, and, if a little thin, yet withal it was not a thinness that implied want of bodily vigor, but rather an extreme of nervous energy, and a sufficiency of muscle.

Joyce dashed at once into a glowing description of her morning's performance.

"We have had such a delightful morning, Mab and I," she began; "no end of fun in father's study."

"Fun in a study? Oh!" This in a voice of comic horror.

"Well, why not? We've only turned everything as nearly upside down as possible. If you'd been there we should have done it in half the time."

"Is it likely I should have aided and abetted? I'm only surprised that Mab should have allowed such iniquity to be perpetrated."

"She couldn't help it. You know I'm the ruling spirit in the house. Come in at once, Frank, and pronounce an opinion on our handiwork. From your first exclamation we shall be able to judge what father's will be when he walks into the room."

But Frank demurred vigorously to this proposal.

"You know it's my last day with you. I'm off to London by the first train to-morrow morning. I've no end to say to you. Two are company; three, begging Mab's pardon, are not. Come into the orchard, and let us see how the fruit-blossoms are getting on!"

Meantime, Mab and Kathleen, indoors, were bringing their work of decoration to a close, Mab, with a sudden diminution of energy, which told either of a decrease of interest in her task now that the ruling spirit had departed, or else of headache and languor, brought on probably by the heavy odor of the masses of sweet-scented flowers they had packed into such a small space. An atmosphere compounded of the scents of hyacinth, hawthorn, narcissus, and lilac would be assuredly more likely to suit the organs of bee or butterfly than those of a supersensitive human being.

More than once Mab put her hand to her head. Kathleen, flitting in and out of the garden, could not possibly have felt overpowered by the fragrance, but, nevertheless, she had suddenly grown silent, and an expression somewhat akin to sullenness had chased away the smiles and sunshine from her pretty face.

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At the foot of the garden-steps, with a final pair of hyacinth-pots in her arms, she stood still, looking after Joyce and her lover on their way toward the orchard-gate.

"You're no prettier than I am; you're taller, maybe—a trifle, that's all—but that's no reason why—" she began muttering.

"Kathleen, I'm waiting," called Mab from within. "Put those two flower-pots just within the fireplace—so. Now, I don't believe we could find room for any more, if we tried our hardest. Don't go away, I want to ask you about your brother. Has he really made up his mind to go to London—will nothing make him give up the idea?"

"Nothing, Miss Mab, I'm sure. He has as good as said good-bye to all of us, and means, I know, to set off some time to-day," answered Kathleen, evidently with an effort bringing back her thoughts to answer her young mistress's questions.

"But he has not said good-bye to me, Kathleen. He must come in and see me, I've something special to say to him."

"I told him so, miss, only this morning. I told him how good you had been to him, lending him books and all that; but he said he shouldn't dream of coming up to the house, unless you sent for him."

"Well, then, I'll send for him. You must go down to the cottage, and tell him I'm waiting in here to see him. I want to know exactly what he is going to do in London, and I want to make him give me a solemn promise that he won't join any of those dreadful secret societies."

Kathleen's face brightened.

"Ah, if you could make him do that, miss, it's a heavy load you'd be lifting from mother's heart," she said, in her excitement unconsciously drifting into her father's brogue—a feat she did not often accomplish, for her mother, being a thoroughbred cockney, had impressed upon her daughter from her earliest years that all such eccentricities of speech were to be avoided, as indicative of kinship with an inferior race of people.

Mab began to fear she had been indiscreet.

"Don't tell Ned what I want him here for," she said, "or perhaps he won't come. Only say I want to say good-bye to him."

"Do you think he'd refuse anything to you, Miss Mab?" cried Kathleen, as she departed on her mission, "why he worships the very ground you walk on."

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Kathleen shut the glass door as she went down the steps into the garden. The room seem to grow more and more stifling. Mab's head went round. She sank into her father's easy-chair beside his writing-table, feeling drowsy and stupid. Her eyes closed, she would get up in a minute, she thought, unlock the door leading into the hall, open the opposite window and let a full current of fresh air sweep through the room, and then straightway her head dropped upon her hand, she leaned backward in her chair, falling into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, and there came the sound of a foot-fall on the garden steps, a face looked in through the glass door, the handle turned, and a man entered the room.

It was Ned Donovan, the gardener's son. His face, like his sister's, proclaimed his nationality. He was the beau-ideal of an Irishman of the heroic, enthusiastic type, the type one can not bear to think of as priest-ridden or demagogue-driven, and yet which so frequently falls into the trammels of either priest or demagogue. He had the bluest of eyes, curly chestnut hair, a woman's mouth and chin, and a carriage of head and shoulders such as one sees in the soldier-Irishman, and in no one else. Under his arm he carried a couple of volumes of Carlyle's "Frederick the Great," and, if one had opened the first volume, Mab's name would have been seen on the title-page.

He gave a great start of surprise when he caught sight of the sleeping girl. Then he too became conscious of the oppressive atmosphere.

"It's enough to suffocate her," he muttered, doing what Mab had proposed to do, opening both doors and letting a free current of air pass through.

Mab stirred in her sleep as the sweet, feesh breeze swept over her face. Something of color came into her pale cheeks, her lips half parted, as though about to smile. In sleep Mab always looked an idealized likeness of the Mab who went about the house with cupboard keys, or else knitting-pins, in her fingers. It was so now. The look of anxious, troubled thought had disappeared, in its stead there was an expression of serenity and peace, which brought out a latent beauty never seen in the Mab of waking life.

Ned's expression as he gazed down upon her was first one of admiration, next one of sharp, sudden pain.

"Those cursed walls which rank and wealth set up!" he mut-

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tered, breathing hard and clenching his big strong fingers into the palms of his hands till naught but nerve and muscle showed in them.

He stood for a few moments looking down on her irresolutely. Should he make some slight stir in the room, rouse her from her sleep, and say his good-bye?

"I should like to have heard her sweet voice once again," he said to himself; "Heaven only knows when and how I may hear it next."

But at this very moment there came the sound of another voice, and this not a sweet one, from the other side of the door.

"Mab! Joyce! where are you hidden?" It asked once, twice, and again. It was a weak, tinkling little voice, all head-notes, and those out of tune. And it was a voice Ned knew he should never forget, since he had heard it assert one day, all heedless of his presence, "Mab, really you carry things too far. The idea of lending Herbert Spencer to a gardener's boy! You had much better send him a spelling-book."

So with one more look and one more sigh, and a muttered "God bless you, Miss Mab," the handsome Irishman departed, closing behind him the glass door leading into the garden exactly at the moment that Mrs. Shenstone turned the handle and entered the room from the hall.

"Mab, Joyce, are you here?" she queried for the last time, as she crossed the threshold. Then she stood still, looking round her incredulously. Was it daughters of hers who had wrought this havoc in the quiet, neat little study?

"Dear me, dear me!" she soliloquized, "where do they get their notions from? Some unheard-of preposterous idea is forever coming into their heads. One day one thing, another day something else equally far-fetched and ridiculous."

It may be noted in passing that for the past twenty years of her life two complaints had been perpetually on Mrs. Shenstone's lips. The first had reference to her husband: "He spends the whole of his time in his study; except at meals I never see him," it had run. The second related to her daughters, the number and variety of their ideas.

"Where do they get them from? Certainly not from me," had been her all but daily question and answer, as first Mab and then Joyce would startle her into wonder.

It was certainly not from her that the two girls derived their in-

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dividuality. Her nature was too superficial, too slightly cut, as it were, to impress itself upon anything, even her own children.

Physically, even, they were at opposite poles. Their one point of resemblance to her was their long, slender figures. Her face might have been molded in another planet for all likeness it bore to theirs. It was colorless, trifling in feature, devoid of expression. Any child with four pricks of a pencil within a round O might have drawn it on a slate. But, trivial and uninteresting though it might be, to its possessor it was a mine of wealth, for it gave her subject for thought, and occupation for every one of her waking hours. Only her looking-glass could have rendered an account of the number of admiring glances Mrs. Shenstone bestowed upon herself between sunrise and sunset. Now, after her first hasty look round the transformed study and exclamation of surprise, she walked as naturally to the mirror above the fireplace as the duck walks to the pond. Midway, however, between the door and the mantel-piece, she came upon Mab asleep in the easy-chair, and stopped with another exclamation upon her lips.

"How extraordinary! Another whim, is it! Are they going to turn this room into a sleeping-apartment, or what have they in their heads now?"

She broke off for a moment, then her thoughts went zigzagging into exclamations of surprise as before.

"Dear me, dear me! How remarkably plain and odd-looking the child is getting! I declare, she looks years older than I do! Now, if she were only a little more like me in the face" (here a complacent side-glance toward the mirror) "people might think she was my elder sister! Oh, dear, what's this on the floor?"

The last sentence was added with a little accession of energy as her foot caught in the volumes which Ned Donovan, in his haste to open door and windows, had deposited on the floor at Mab's feet.

Mab opened her eyes with a start. For an instant she looked about her confusedly, then an expression of amazement went sweeping over her face.

"Why—why," she stammered, looking well over Mrs. Shenstone's head with wide-opened yet unseeing eyes, "when did you come home, papa? Why didn't I hear you come in?"

She jumped up from her chair, then suddenly paused, passing her hand vaguely over her forehead and eyes.

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"Oh—h, what is it? Where has he gone?" she asked, in a bewildered tone, looking about her uncertainly.

Mrs. Shenstone went to her and took her hand.

"Why, Mab, you must be dreaming!" she cried. "Wake up! you look uncanny and bewildered."

Mab drew the deep breath of an awakening sleeper.

"I suppose I must have been dreaming," she said, slowly, "but I could have declared that my father stood there just in front of me, looking, oh, so terribly sad."

Mrs. Shenstone pointed to the clock.

"Five minutes to twelve," she said, "your father has just a minute ago stepped out of the train onto the platform, and, I should imagine, was looking anything but sad at the prospect of seeing us all again."

CHAPTER II.

WE measure time by its loss. Two years out of the very middle of a girl's girlhood, looked forward to with the girl's eyes, seems, no doubt, to fall but little short of an eternity; looked back upon, which, after all, must be the only way to gauge its minutes, it seems but a wave-beat on a shore, the flight of a bird from north to south across the sky—nothing more.

So at least it seemed to Mab and Joyce, as, exactly two years from the day on which, with blithe hearts, they had decorated and generally turned upside-down their father's study, they stood in the same room talking over what had been, what was, what was to be.

Not with such light-tripping tongues as heretofore, for this quiet, unpretending little room has grown to seem—to Mab, at any rate—a solemn and holy place; a place, that is, sacred to solemn and holy memories, ever since that terrible day on which, as she stood on the threshold awaiting her father's return, his dead body had been brought past her into the house and laid upon the sofa in this room.

Mr. Shenstone's sudden and awful death had been a great shock to his family. He was in the very prime of his manhood, his health, his wealth; he might have said with the fool of old time, had he been in the habit of indulging in frivolous soliloquies: "Soul, thou has much goods laid up for many years, take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry," when lo! on a sudden, alighting from his train, at

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the end of a short, pleasant journey, he took a false step, he fell heavily upon the platform, he struck his temple against an iron pillar as he fell, and headlong into eternity he went.

Mrs. Shenstone's grief was of the vehement, hysteric kind. Its outward form of expression was the insistance upon the constant daily attendance of a local doctor, the constant daily communication with a London or Parisian dressmaker, an increased subscription to Mudie's library, and incessant appeals for sympathy to everyone who went near her.

Mab's grief was of the silent, undemonstrative kind. Its outward expression was *nil*.

Joyce's grief was of the healthy, vigorous kind common to girls of a healthy, vigorous nature, who know that fate, as it crosses their path, will come to them with both hands full—one of sorrows, one of joys—and are prepared to take heartily whichever hand she offers; to weep with a will if she holds out her left, to laugh with a will if she holds out her right. Joyce knew nothing of half measures; "thorough or nothing" had ever been her motto. Only next to her sunny good temper was her aptitude for deciding momentous questions at a glance. "That is why they are called 'momentous,' they are to be decided in a moment," she had once quaintly informed Frank Ledyard, when he had on one occasion slightly demurred to her rapid decision on a matter of importance.

Somehow this habit of Joyce's inspired people with confidence, not only in her capacity for arranging mundane affairs, but also in the mundane affairs themselves. Things certainly could not be in a very desperate state, so people were apt to reason, when they admitted of such simple and easy solutions.

Even now, as she and Mab stood together in the dead father's study discussing a serious question, Mab's nervous frown slightly relaxed and her deep-set eyes looked less cavernous under the influence of Joyce's cheery decisiveness of voice and manner.

"It can't be helped, Mab, so we'll just make the best of it. Mother's heart is set upon going to London, and getting into the vortex—whatever that means—and go she will. You have tried your hardest to keep her here, so also has Uncle Archie, so also Aunt Bell; very well, you see it can't be prevented. So we must just look the thing well in the face, and make the best of it."

Mab sighed heavily.

"If papa were here—" she began, but broke off abruptly.

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"If papa were here he would hold the reins and keep things straight," said Joyce, taking up the broken sentence and completing it. "He is not here"—here her voice hushed reverently—"so I will hold the reins instead, and keep mother out of mischief."

"Oh, Joyce!"

"I mean it. I know what I'm saying. Some one must do it. You think it beyond your capabilities; I don't feel it beyond mine—"

At this moment the door opened, and Uncle Archie entered. He was elder brother to Joyce's and Mab's father—a small, thin, wiry-looking old gentleman on the down side of sixty. He had a perpetual frown on his forehead, and a perpetual grumble in his eye; his voice was grating, irritating. It recalled the sense of grains of sand under the eyelids, thorns up the side of one's finger-nail, or the stinging nettle-rash of one's juvenile legs.

"If there's one thing in the world I detest more than another," he said, raspingly, "it's the overweening confidence of very young people—of very young people." The last sentence repeated with a pointed emphasis.

Joyce looked up at him saucily.

"Poor Uncle Archie," she said, pityingly, "what has put you out now?"

"What has put me out! Is there anything in this house that doesn't put me out, I should like to know? First one thing, then another. Nothing goes as it ought. I've been talking with your mother for the last half-hour."

"Ah—h—h!"

"Reasoning with her, I should have said, if anyone in this house had been capable of such a thing as reasoning; but, at any rate, talking to her of her folly in breaking up her home here and setting up an establishment in London, where she knows no one with an ounce of common-sense in their heads."

"But, Uncle Archie, no one has more than a pinch of that precious quality here. You know you said so only yesterday."

"No one, in fact, who can put two and two together with a certain result," went on Uncle Archie, heedless of the interruption. "But there, I might as well have tried to reason with a skein of silk. Anything more limp, more tangly than a woman's brain I can't imagine."

"Poor old Uncle Archie!" again ejaculated Joyce, softly. "What a life Aunt Bell must have of it sometimes!"

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"I repeat—"

"Oh, don't!"

"Anything more limp and tangly than a skein of silk—"

"You said a woman's brain just now."

"Than a skein of silk and a woman's brain is beyond my conception. And now, on top of it all, comes this letter still further to worry me."

Here the old gentleman put his hand into his pocket and drew out a letter.

"Why, that's from Frank! Give it me, uncle," cried Joyce.

"Don't be in such a hurry; it's addressed to me. But I want to talk it over with you. Come, sit down at this table."

Here Uncle Archie drew a chair close to the table, and sat down. Mab crept out of her corner, and left the room without a word. Uncle Archie had taken the dead father's chair. To her way of thinking, it should be kept empty and sacred to his memory for ever more.

But Joyce, without demur, kneeled on the floor beside the old gentleman, looking up in his face.

"What can Frank have to say to you? Really, he might have told me beforehand that he was going to write to you."

"Really, I see no necessity for his so doing," said Uncle Archie, snappishly. "This letter comes in consequence of a remark made by your mother in Mr. Ledyard's presence."

"Addressed to Frank, was it?"

This was asked with a little show of nervous apprehension.

"Really, I'm not prepared to say to whom the remark was addressed. Your mother is in the habit—you may have noticed it before now—of speaking out whatever comes into her mind, irrespective of the person or persons she may be addressing. No doubt it is a charmingly ingenuous and juvenile habit, and worthy of cultivation; at the same time it is apt to be slightly embarrassing to those on whose behalf it is exercised."

"Uncle Archie, please tell me, word for word, what my mother said to Frank about me."

"No, I couldn't undertake to tax my memory so far; I will give you the general idea of her meaning. My own words you must allow me to use."

"Oh, don't take a hundred years over it."

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