

"Do you know, Mary," he said, one day, when she happened to be idle and was standing talking to him as he sat on the edge of his bed, "a curious thing happened to me the very day before we went out on that sortie. I saw that fellow, Cumming, the rascal that ruined the bank, and then bolted, you know. For a moment I did not recall his face, but it struck me directly afterwards. I saw him go into a house. He has grown a beard, and he is evidently living as a quiet and respected British resident. It was a capital idea of his, for he is as safe here as he would be if he were up in a balloon. I intended to look him up when I got back again into Paris, but you see circumstances prevented my doing so."

"Of course you will get him arrested as soon as the siege is over, Cuthbert. I am very glad that he is found."

"Well, I don't know that I had quite made up my mind about that. I don't suppose that he made off with any great sum. You see the companies he bolstered up with the bank's money, all smashed at the same time. I don't suppose that he intended to rob the bank at the time he helped them. Probably he had sunk all his savings in them, and thought they would pull round with the aid of additional capital. As far as I could make out, from the report of the men who went into the matter, he did not seem to have drawn any money at all on his own account, until the very day he bolted, when he took the eight or ten thousand pounds there was in the safe. No. I don't think I meant to hand him over or indeed to say anything about it. I thought I would give him a good fright, which he richly deserves, and then ask him a few questions. I have never quite understood how it was that dear old dad came to buy those shares. I did inquire so far as to find out it was Cumming himself who transferred them to him, and I should really like to hear what was said at the time. If the man can prove to me that when he sold them he did not know that the bank was going to break, I should have no ill-will against him, but if I were sure he persuaded him to buy, knowing that ruin would follow, I would hunt him down and spare no pains to get him punished."

"Why should he have persuaded your father to buy those shares?"

"That's just what I cannot make out. He could have had no interest in involving him in the smash. Besides they were not on intimate terms in any way. I cannot imagine that my father would have gone to him for advice in reference to business investments. It was, of course, to your father he would have turned in such matters."

"How long had he been a shareholder?"

"He bought the shares only two months before his death, which makes the matter all the more singular."

"What did father say, Cuthbert?" the girl said, after a short pause. "I suppose you spoke to him about it."

"He said that my father had heard some rumors to the effect that the bank was not in a good state, and having no belief whatever in them, he bought the shares, thinking that his doing so would have a good effect upon its credit, in which as a sort of county institution, he felt an interest."

"But did not father, who was solicitor to the bank, and must have known something of its affairs, warn him of the danger that he was running?"

"That is what I asked him myself, but he said that he only attended to its legal business, and outside that knew nothing of its affairs."

"It seems a curious affair altogether," Mary said, gravely. "But it is time for me to be at work again."

CHAPTER XVI.

WHILE in the ambulance, Mary Brander resolutely put her conversation with Cuthbert aside, but as soon as she started for her walk home, it became uppermost in her thoughts. It was certainly a curious affair. From time to time friends at home with whom she corresponded, sent her local newspapers, and this had especially been the case during the first few

months of her stay in Germany, as they naturally supposed she would be greatly interested in the calamity of the bank failure.

She had, at the time it was issued, read the full report of the committee of investigation upon its affairs, and, although she had passed lightly over the accounts, she had noticed that the proceeds of the sale of the Fairclose estates were put down as subject to a deduction of fifteen thousand pounds for a previous mortgage to Jeremiah Brander, Esq. The matter had made no impression upon her mind at this time, but it now came back to her remembrance.

Of course it was perfectly natural that if Mr. Hartington wished to borrow money it was to her father, as his solicitor and friend, that he would have gone. There could be nothing unusual in that, but what Cuthbert had told her about Mr. Hartington buying the shares but two months before his death was certainly singular. Surely her father could have prevented his taking so disastrous a step. Few men are regarded by members of their family in exactly the same light as they are considered by the public, and Jeremiah Brander was certainly no exception. While the suavest of men in the eyes of his fellow-townsmen, his family were well aware that he possessed a temper. When the girls were young his conversation was always guarded in their hearing, but as they grew up he no longer felt the same necessity for prudence of speech, and frequently indulged in criticisms of the colleagues, for whom he professed the most unbounded respect and admiration in public.

Mary had often felt something like remorse at the thought that the first time she read Martin Chuzzlewit, many touches in the delineation of Mr. Pecksniff's character had reminded her of her father. She believed him to be a just and upright man, but she could not help admitting to herself that he was not by a long way the man the public believed him to be. It was a subject on which she rarely permitted herself to think. They had never got on very well together, and she acknowledged to herself that this was as much her fault as his. It was not so much the fact that she had a strong will and was bent on going her own way, regardless of the opinion of others, that had

been the cause of the gulf which had grown up between them, as the dissimilarity of their character, the absolute difference between the view which she held of things in general, to that which the rest of her family entertained regarding them, and the outspoken frankness with which she was in the habit of expressing her contempt for things they praised highly.

Thinking over this matter of Mr. Hartington's purchase of the bank shares, she found herself wondering what motive her father could have had in permitting him to buy them, for knowing how the Squire relied upon his opinion in all business matters, she could not doubt that the latter could have prevented this disastrous transaction. That he must have had some motive she felt sure, for her experience of him was amply sufficient for her to be well aware that he never acted without a motive of some sort. So far as she could see, no motive was apparent, but this in no way altered her opinion.

"Cuthbert thinks it a curious affair, and no wonder," she said to herself. "I don't suppose he has a suspicion that anything has been wrong, and I don't suppose there has; but there may have been what they call sharp practice. I don't think Cuthbert likes my father, but he is the very last man to suspect anyone. It was horrid, before, being at Fairclose—it will be ten times as bad now. The whole thing is disgusting. It is wicked of me to think that my father could possibly do anything that wasn't quite honorable and right—especially when there is not the slightest reason for suspecting him. It is only, I suppose, because I know he isn't exactly what other people think him to be, that makes me uneasy about it. I know well enough that I should never have gone away from home as I did, if it had not been that I hated so to hear him running down people with whom he seemed to be so friendly, and making fun of all the things in which he seemed so interested. It used to make me quite hateful, and he was just as glad, when I said I should like to go to Girton, to get rid of me as I was to go.

"It is all very well to say, honor your father and mother, but if you can't honor them what are you to do? I have no doubt I am worrying myself for nothing now, but I can't help it. It

is dreadful to feel like that towards one's father, but I felt quite a chill run through me when Cuthbert said he should go and see that man Cumming and try to get to the bottom of things. One thing is certain, I will never live at Fairclose—never. If he leaves it between us, Julia and Clara may live there if they like, and let me have so much a year and go my own way. But I will never put foot in it after father and mother are gone. It is all very miserable, and I do think I am getting to be a most hateful girl. Here am I suspecting my own father of having done something wrong, although of what I have not the least idea, and that without a shadow of reason, then I am almost hating a woman because a man I refused loves her. I have become discouraged and have thrown up all the plans I had laid down for myself, because it does not seem as easy as I thought it would be. No, that is not quite true. It is much more because Cuthbert has laughed me out of them. Anyhow I should be a nice woman to teach other women what they should do, when I am as weak as the weakest of them. I don't think there ever was a more objectionable sort of girl in the world than I have become."

By the time that she had arrived at this conclusion she had nearly reached home. A sudden feeling that she could not in her present mood submit to be petted and fussed over by Madame Michaud struck her, and turning abruptly she walked with brisk steps to the Arc de Triomphe and then down the Champs Elysées and along the Rue Rivoli, and then round the Boulevards, returning home fagged out, but the better for her exertion. One thing she determined during her walk, she would give up her work at the ambulance.

"There are plenty of nurses," she said, "and one more or less will make no difference. I am miserably weak, but at any rate I have sense enough to know that it will be better for me not to be going there every day, now that he is out of danger. He belongs to someone else, and I would rather die than that he should ever dream what a fool I am; and now I know it myself it will be harder and harder as he gets better to be talking to him indifferently." Accordingly the next morning, when

she went down, she told Dr. Swinburne that she felt that she must, at any rate for a time, give up nursing.

"You are quite right, Miss Brander," he said, kindly, "you have taxed your strength too much already, and are looking a mere shadow of what you were two months ago. You are quite right to take a rest. I have plenty of assistance, and there is not likely to be such a strain again as that we have lately gone through. Paris cannot hold out many weeks longer, and after the two failures I feel sure that there will be no more attempts at a sortie, especially as all hopes that an army may come to our relief are now at an end."

She found it more difficult to tell Cuthbert, but it was not necessary for her to begin the subject, for he noticed at once that she had not the usual nursing-dress on.

"You are going to take a holiday to-day, I suppose?" he said, as she came up to his bedside.

"I am going to take a holiday for some little time," she said, quietly. "They can do very well without me now. Almost all the patients in this ward are convalescent, and I really feel that I need a rest."

"I am sure you do," he said, earnestly, "it has been an awful time for you to go through, and you have behaved like a heroine. A good many of us owe our lives to you, but the work has told on you sadly. I don't suppose you know yourself how much. We shall all miss you at this end of the ward—miss you greatly, but I am sure there is not one who will not feel as I do, glad to know that you are taking a rest after all your work. Of course you will look in sometimes to see how your patients are progressing. As for myself I hope I shall be able to come up to see you at the Michauds in another ten days or so. Now that the doctor has taken to feeding me up I can feel that I am gaining strength every day."

"You must not hurry, Cuthbert," she said, gravely. "You must keep quiet and patient."

"You are not in your nursing-dress now, Miss Brander, and I decline altogether to be lectured by you. I have been very good and obedient up to now, but I only bow to lawfully con-

stituted authority, and now I come under the head of convalescent I intend to emancipate myself."

"I shall not come down here to see you unless I hear good accounts of your conduct," she said, with an attempt to speak playfully. "Well, good-bye, Cuthbert. I hope you will not try to do too much."

"Good-bye, dear, thanks for all your goodness to me," he said, earnestly, as he held her hand for a moment in his.

"He had no right to call me dear," Mary thought, almost indignantly, as he left the hospital, "and he does not guess I know why she is longing to be out again. I almost wonder he has never spoken to me about her. He would know very well that I should be interested in anything that concerns him, and I think he might have told me. I suppose he will bring her up some day and introduce her as his wife. Anyhow I am glad I know about it, and shall be able to take it as a matter of course."

Mary did not pay another visit to the ambulance. Now that she had given up her work she felt the reaction, and although she refused to take to her bed she passed her time sitting listless and weak in an easy-chair, paying but slight attention to Madame Michaud's talk, and often passing the greater part of the day in her own room.

Madame Michaud felt so uneasy about her that she went down to the ambulance and brought up Dr. Swinburne, who scolded Mary for not having sent for him before. He prescribed tonics, sent her up a dozen of wine from the hospital, ordered her to wrap herself up and sit at an open window for a time each day, and to make an effort to take a turn round the garden as soon as she felt strong enough to do so.

On his return to the ambulance the surgeon said carelessly to Cuthbert, who had now gained sufficient strength to be of considerable use as an assistant in the ward—

"I have been up to see your late nurse, Miss Brander. There is nothing serious the matter with her, but, as I thought likely would be the case, she has collapsed now that her work is over, and will need a good deal of care and attention to build her up

again. You will be out in a few days now and I am sure it will do her good if you will go up and have a chat with her and cheer her up a bit. She is not in bed. My visit did her good; but she wants rousing, and remember if you can get her to laugh, and joke her about her laziness, it will do more good than by expressing your pity for her."

"I think I am well enough to be discharged now, Doctor," Cuthbert said, eagerly.

"Yes, but you will have to be very careful for some time. You will want generous food, and I don't see how you are to get it outside."

"I suppose the restaurants are still open?"

"The common ones are closed, but you can still get a dinner at some of the best places, although you will have to pay very heavily for it."

"I don't mind that, Doctor; and besides I am very anxious to be at work again. It will be no more tiring standing at an easel than it is doing what I can to help here."

"That is true enough, providing you do not do too much of it. Up to a certain extent it will be a good thing for you, but mind, I distinctly forbid you to attempt any such folly as to try to walk from the Quartier Latin up to Passy. Let me see," he added, thoughtfully. "Yes, I think it can be managed. I will send you home by the ambulance that will be here to-morrow morning at eight o'clock. You are to keep yourself quiet all day, and I will get Madame de Millefleurs to send her carriage round for you at eleven o'clock next day, to take you round by Passy. She has told me many times that it is always at the disposal of any of my patients to whom it would be useful. I will see her some time to-morrow and arrange about it."

"Thank you, indeed, Doctor. I need not say how grateful I am to you for all the kindness I have received here."

"We have done the best we could for you," the doctor said, "and I am sure there is not one of those who have provided funds for this ambulance but feels well rewarded by the knowledge that it has been the means of saving many lives. I think

we may say that we have not lost one whom it was humanly possible to save, while in the French hospitals they have lost hundreds from over-crowding, want of ventilation, and proper sanitary arrangements. The mortality there has been fearful, and the percentage of deaths after amputations positively disgraceful."

René came late that afternoon to pay a visit to Cuthbert, and was delighted to find that he was to be out next morning.

"I have kept your rooms in order," he said, "and will have a big fire lighted in them before you arrive. They will give you breakfast before you leave, I hope."

"They will do that, René, but I shall manage very well if there is still anything left of that store of mine in the big cupboard."

"You may be sure that there is," René replied. "I am always most particular in locking up the doors when I come away, and I have not used the key you gave me of the cupboard. I was positively afraid to. I am virtuous, I hope, but there are limits to one's power to resist temptation. I know you told me to take anything I liked but if I had once began I could never have stopped."

"Then we will have a feast to-morrow, René. Ask all the others in to supper, but you must act as cook. Tell them not to come to see me till eight o'clock. If they kept dropping in all day it would be too much for me. I wish Dampierre could be with us, but he has not got on so fast as I have. His wounds were never so serious, but the doctor said the bones were badly smashed and take longer to heal. He says he is not a good patient either, but worries and fidgets. I don't think those visits of Minette were good for him, the doctor had to put a stop to them. He would talk and excite himself so. However, I hear that he is likely to be out in another fortnight."

"By that time it will be all over," René said, "negotiations are going on now, and they say that in three or four days we shall surrender."

"The best thing to do, René. Ever since that last sortie failed all hope has been at an end, and there has been no point

in going on suffering, for I suppose by this time the suffering has been very severe."

"Not so very severe, Cuthbert. Of course, we have been out of meat for a long time, for the ration is so small it is scarcely worth calling meat, but the flour held out well and so did the wine and most other things. A few hundred have been killed by the Prussian shells, but with that exception the mortality has not been very greatly above the average, except that smallpox has been raging and has carried off a large number. Among young children, too, the mortality has been heavy, owing to the want of milk and things of that sort. I should doubt if there has been a single death from absolute starvation."

To M. Goudé's students that supper at Cuthbert Hartington's was a memorable event. The master himself was there. Two large hams, and dishes prepared from preserved meats were on the table, together with an abundance of good wine. It was the first reunion they had had since the one before the sortie, and it was only the gaps among their number, and the fact that their host and several of their comrades were still weak, and greatly changed in appearance, that restrained their spirits from breaking into hilarity.

The next morning Madame de Millefleurs' carriage came to the door and Cuthbert was driven to the Michauds. For a moment Margot failed to recognize Cuthbert as she opened the door. As she did so she exclaimed—

"Mon Dieu, Monsieur Hartington, you look like a ghost."

"I am very far from being a ghost, Margot, though there is not much flesh on my bones. How is Mademoiselle Brander? I hear she has not been well."

"She is as pale as you are, monsieur, but not so thin. She does nothing but sit quiet all day with her eyes wide open—she who was always so bright and active and had a smile for every one. I go out and cry often after going into her room. She has just gone into the parlor. You will find her alone there," she added, for Margot had always had her ideas as to the cause of Cuthbert's visits.

Mary was sitting at the open window and did not look round as Cuthbert entered.

"Well, Mary, is it actually you, doing nothing?" he said, cheerily.

She turned round with a start, and a flush of color swept across her face.

"How you startled me," she said. "I am glad indeed to see you. I did not think you would be out so soon. Surely it is very foolish of you coming so far."

"Still thinking you are a nurse, Mary," he laughed. "I can assure you I am very prudent, and I have been brought up here in a carriage—a carriage with live horses. Dr. Swinburne told me you had not got over the effects of your hard work, and that he had had to order you to take tonics, so you see instead of being a nurse you are a patient at present, while I am a free man. I came out of hospital yesterday morning, and we had a grand supper last night out of my hoards, which I found just as I had left them, which says wonders for the honesty of the Parisians in general, and for the self-denial of my friend René Caillard in particular."

"Why, I should have thought——" and she stopped, abruptly.

"What would you have thought, Miss Brander?"

"Oh, nothing."

"No, no, I cannot be put off in that way. You were going to say that you thought I should have distributed my stores long ago, or that I ought to have sent for them for the use of the hospital. I really ought to have done so. It would have been only fair, but in fact the idea never occurred to me. René had the keys of my rooms and I told him to use the stores as he liked, meaning for himself and for our comrades of the studio."

"I should have thought," she began again, and then, as before, hesitated, and then asked, abruptly, "Have you not something to tell me, Cuthbert—something that an old friend would tell to another? I have been expecting you to tell me all the time you were in the hospital, and have felt hurt you did not."

Cuthbert looked at her in surprise. There was a slight flush on her cheek and it was evident that she was deeply in earnest.

"Tell you something, Mary," he repeated. "I really don't know what you mean—no, honestly, I have not a notion."

"I don't wish to pry into your secrets," she said, coldly. "I learned them accidentally, but as you don't wish to take me into your confidence we will say no more about it."

"But we must say more about it," he replied. "I repeat I have no idea of what you are talking about. I have no secret whatever on my mind. By your manner it must be something serious, and I think I have a right to know what it is."

She was silent for a moment and then said—

"If you wish it I can have no possible objection to tell you. I will finish the question I began twice. I should have thought that you would have wished that your stores should be sent to the lady you are engaged to."

Cuthbert looked at her in silent surprise.

"My dear Mary," he said, gravely, at last, "either you are dreaming or I am. I understood that your reply to my question, the year before last, was as definite and as absolute a refusal as a man could receive. Certainly I have not from that moment had any reason to entertain a moment's doubt that you yourself intended it as a rejection."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, rising to her feet with an energy of which a few minutes before she would have deemed herself altogether incapable. "Are you pretending that I am alluding to myself, are you insulting me by suggesting that I mean that I am engaged to you?"

"All I say is, Mary, that if you do not mean that, I have not the most remote idea in the world what you do mean."

"You say that because you think it is impossible I should know," Mary retorted, indignantly, "but you are mistaken. I have had it from her own lips."

"That she was engaged to me?"

"She came to the hospital to see you the night you were brought in, and she claimed admittance on the ground that she was affianced to you."

Cuthbert's surprise changed to alarm as it flashed across him

that the heavy work and strain had been too much for the girl, and that her brain had given way.

"I think that there must be some mistake, Mary," he said, soothingly.

"There is no mistake," she went on, still more indignantly; "she came with your friend, René, and I knew her before she spoke, for I had seen her face in a score of places in your sketch-book, and you told me she was a model in your studio. It is no business of mine, Mr. Hartington, whom you are going to marry. I can understand, perhaps, your wish that the matter should remain for a time a secret, but I did not think when I told you that I knew it, you would have kept up the affectation of ignorance. I have always regarded you as being truthful and honorable beyond all things, and I am bitterly disappointed. I was hurt that you should not have given your confidence to me, but I did think when I told you that I knew your secret you would have manfully owned it, and not descended to a pretence of ignorance."

For a moment Cuthbert's face had expressed bewilderment, but as she went on speaking, a smile stole across his face. Mary noticed it and her voice and manner changed.

"I think, Mr. Hartington," she said, with great dignity, "you must see that it will be pleasanter for us both that this interview shall terminate."

He rose from his seat, took his hat off the table, and said, quietly—

"I have but one observation to make before I go. You have discovered, Miss Brander, that you made one mistake in your life. Has it never struck you that you might also have made a mistake this time? I think that our very long acquaintance might have induced you to hesitate a little before you assumed it as a certainty that your old acquaintance was acting in this way, and that for the sake of old times you might have given him the benefit of the doubt."

The strength that Mary's indignation had given her, deserted her suddenly. Her fingers tightened on the back of the chair by her side for support.

"How could there be any mistake," she asked, weakly, her vigorous attack now turned into a defence, more by his manner than his words, "when I heard her say so?"

"Sit down, child," he said, in his old authoritative manner. "You are not fit to stand."

She felt it would be a step towards defeat if she did so, but he brought up the chair in which she had before been sitting and placed it behind her, and quietly assisted her into it.

"Now," he went on, "you say you heard it from her lips. What did she say?"

"She said she insisted on going in to see you, and that as your affianced wife she had a right to do so."

"She said that, did she? That she was the affianced wife of Cuthbert Hartington?"

Mary thought for a moment.

"No, she did not use those words, at least, not that I can remember; but it was not necessary, I knew who she was. I have seen the sketches in your book, and there were several of them on the walls of your room. Of course I knew who she was speaking of, though she did not, so far as I can remember, use your name."

"Did it never occur to you, Miss Brander, that it was a natural thing one should have many sketches of the girl who always stood as a model in the studio, and that every student there would have his sketch-book full of them? Did you not know that there were three or four other wounded men of the same corps as myself in the hospital; that one at least was a fellow-student of mine, and also a foreigner, and that this young woman was just as likely to be asking to see him as to see me?"

An awful feeling of doubt and shame came with overpowering force over Mary Brander.

"No," she said, desperately, "I never thought of such a thing. Naturally I thought it was you, and there was no reason why it shouldn't be. You were perfectly free to please yourself, only I felt hurt that when you got better you did not tell me."

Her voice was so weak that Cuthbert poured some water into a glass and held it to her lips.

"Now, child," he went on in a lighter voice, "I am not going to scold you—you are too weak to be scolded. Some day I may scold you as you deserve. Not only is Minette—I told you her name before—nothing to me, but I dislike her as a passionate, dangerous young woman; capable, perhaps, of good, but certainly capable of evil. However, I regret to say that Arnold Dampierre, the man who was in the next bed to me, you know, does not see her in the same light, and I am very much afraid he will be fool enough to marry her. Actually, she did a few days later obtain permission to see him, and has, I believe, seen him several times since; but as he was moved out of your ward whilst I was battling with the fever, I have not seen her. Now don't cry, child, you have been a goose, but there is no harm done, and you ought to be glad to know that your old friend is not going to make a fool of himself; and he can still be regarded by you as truthful and honorable. Do you think I would have taken you round to my rooms if I had been going to make her their mistress?"

"Don't, don't!" the girl cried. "Don't say anything more, Cuthbert. I cannot bear it."

"I am not going to say any more. Madame de Millefleurs' horses must by this time be half-frozen, and her coachman be out of all patience, and I must be going. I shall come again as soon as I can, and I shall be very angry if I don't find you looking much more like yourself when I next come."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE belief that in a few hours the siege would come to an end was so general the next morning, that Cuthbert determined to lose no time in seeing Cumming. As soon as the way was open the man might take the opportunity to move off to some other hiding-place; and, therefore, instead of bringing out his canvases, as he had intended, Cuthbert decided to call on him at once. Having chartered one of the few remaining fiacres,

at an exorbitant rate, he drove to the house where he had seen Cumming enter, and went into the concierge.

"I want some information, my friend," he said, laying a five-franc piece on the table. "You have a foreigner lodging here?" The man nodded.

"Monsieur Jackson is a good tenant," he said. "He pays well for any little services."

"How long has he been here?"

"He came just after war was declared."

"Has he taken his apartments for a long period?"

"He has taken them for a year, monsieur. I think he will take them permanently. I hope so, for he gives no trouble, and has never been out late once since he came here."

"I want to see him," Cuthbert said, "I believe he is an old acquaintance of mine."

"If you ring his bell he will open himself. He keeps an old woman as servant, but she has just gone out to do his shopping. He always take his meals at home. He is on the second floor—the door to the left."

Cuthbert went up and rang the bell. Cumming himself opened the door. He looked at his visitor inquiringly.

"You do not remember me, Mr. Cumming?" Cuthbert said, cheerfully. "I am not surprised, for I have but just recovered from a very serious wound. I will come in and sit down, if you don't mind; I want to have a chat with you. My name is Cuthbert Hartington!"

The man had given a violent start when his name was mentioned, and his face turned to an ashy pallor. He hesitated for a moment, and then, as Cuthbert entered, he closed the door behind him, and silently led the way into the sitting-room.

"I happened to see you in the street," Cuthbert went on, pleasantly, as he seated himself. "Of course, your beard has altered you a bit, and I could not at first recall your face, but it soon came back to me. It was a happy idea of yours shutting yourself up here when there was no chance of an extradition warrant being applied for. However, to-morrow or next day that little difficulty will be at an end. I thought I would come