

A Slight Mistake

"Marriage is the saving of a young man," said my Aunt Tabitha scintillatingly.

I assented, for I find it pays to give a ready acquiescence to abstract propositions.

"You must marry," continued my aunt.

I hesitated, for to assent to the concrete is more dangerous.

"I am still very young," I said meekly.

My aunt turned to my mother.

"Whom shall Alfred marry?"

My mother shook her head.

"Somebody nice," she volunteered.

"What do you say to Letitia Brownlow?" asked my aunt.

"Or Amelia Stafford?"

"Is she not rather—my mother waved one hand; "and Alfred is so slim."

"I think she has a fine figure," responded my aunt. "Or there is Gertrude Williams; she will have a fortune if she outlives her sisters."

"There are only five of them," I said hopefully.

"Or Mabel Gordon?"

"She has taken a course of cooking lessons," observed my mother.

"No, none of these," I cried decisively.

My aunt looked offended.

"Very well, then, choose for yourself," she said tartly.

"Perhaps that would help," I remarked thoughtfully.

"You will choose somebody nice, won't you Alfred?" said my mother.

"With money," observed my aunt.

"Well connected," emphasized my mother.

"Not too young," added my aunt.

"And religious," begged my mother.

"There is no objection to her being good-looking?" I asked, a trifle timidly.

"No, I think not," said my aunt, "provided she fully understands beauty is but skin deep."

"I will tell her," I murmured.

"Well," said my aunt impatiently, after a short pause, "whom do you suggest?"

I thought for a moment.

"What do you say to Winifred Fraser?"

"That misx!" cried my aunt.

"Oh, Alfred!" echoed my mother.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Such a dreadful family!" said my mother.

"So fast!" interjected my aunt.

"But have you never noticed the sun on her hair?" I asked innocently.

"No, none of these," I cried decisively.

My aunt drew herself up.

"We have not noticed the sun on her hair," she said with much dignity; "nor do we wish to observe the sun on her hair."

I was justly annoyed. "I really think it must be Winifred Fraser," I said. "She is very fond of me, and—"

"How can you be so cruel to me!" cried my mother. "Have you noticed how gray my hair is getting? You will not have me long." She drew out her handkerchief.

"You will come to a bad end," said my aunt. "I always thought you were depraved. If you marry that painted hussy you must not expect my countenance."

"Under the circumstances, I will not marry Winifred Fraser," I said with great magnanimity, for I did not particularly want my aunt's countenance.

My aunt snuffed. "You had better not."

"I merely joked," I said soothingly, remembering she had not made her will.

"Indeed!"

"The truth is—I dropped my voice—I am in love with some one else."

"And you never told me!" said my mother reproachfully.

"The girl I love is not free."

"Married!" cried my aunt.

"Not married—but engaged."

"Who is it?" asked my mother gently.

I was silent for a moment, and then I sighed.

"It is Constance Burleigh."

"It would have been a most suitable match," murmured my mother.

"Very suitable," repeated my aunt.

There was a momentary silence, broken by my aunt.

"I did not know Constance was engaged."

"It is a secret; you must not repeat what I have told you."

"I don't like these secret engagements," said my aunt brusquely. "Who told you?"

"She told me herself."

"Who is the man?"

"I do not think I should repeat his name."

"I hope Constance is not throwing herself away."

I shook my head doubtfully.

"You know the man?"

I nodded.

"Is he quite—quite—"

Again I shook my head doubtfully.

"What have you heard?" my aunt asked eagerly.

"I don't think I ought to repeat these things."

"You can surely trust your mother," murmured my mother.

"And my discretion," said my aunt.

"Well," I said, "I have been told he is cruel to his mother."

"Really!" cried the two ladies in a breath.

"His mother told me so herself."

"How sad!" said my mother.

"And what else?" asked my aunt.

"Another relation of his told me he was depraved."

"Poor, poor Constance!" whispered my mother. "Don't mention my name."

"And would probably end badly."

"I expect he drinks," said my aunt grimly.

"Does Constance know this?" asked my mother.

"I don't think so."

"You did not tell her?"

"Of course not."

"I consider it your duty to."

"I really cannot."

"Then I will," said my aunt resolutely.

"What I have said has been in confidence."

"I do not care."

"I beg you not to do so."

"It is my duty. I am too fond of Constance to allow her to throw herself away on this worthless man."

I suggested my shoulders. "Do as you please, but don't mention my name. By the way, Constance said she would probably call this afternoon."

At that moment the bell rang.

"That may be she," said my aunt, flying to the window. "It is."

I got up slowly and sauntered into the conservatory, which adjoins the drawing room. From behind a friendly palm I could see without being seen. I saw my aunt look toward my mother. "If we open her eyes," I heard her whisper, "it may pave the way for Alfred."

My mother said nothing, but I saw the sun on her hair.

The door opened and the servant announced Constance. She came forward with a little eager rush; then stopped short, embarrassed by the want of reciprocity.

"We are glad to see you," said my mother, and kissed her.

My aunt came forward. "We were just speaking of you," she said solemnly. "Sit down."

Constance looked a little crushed. "I thought Alfred would have told you," she murmured.

"We have heard—" began my aunt.

"Hush," interposed my mother.

"Come nearer me, Constance. Won't you take off your hat?"

Constance came and sat by her side.

"If you are alluding to your engagement," said my aunt, somewhat severely, "we have already heard of it."

"You have heard!" cried Constance. "With the deepest sorrow."

Constance drew herself up.

"You do not approve?" she asked proudly.

"We love you too much," said my mother gently.

Constance looked bewildered.

"You are too good for the wretch," cried my aunt.

"What! Oh, what do you mean?" exclaimed my mother.

"If you marry this man," continued my aunt vigorously, "you will regret it."

My mother took her hand. "My sister should not tell you this so suddenly."

"It is my duty to speak, and I will," cried my aunt. "I will not let Constance unite herself to this man with her eyes closed."

"What have you against him?" demanded Constance, a red spot beginning to burn in each cheek.

"He drinks," answered my aunt almost triumphantly.

Constance sank back in the cushions. "I don't believe it," she said faintly.

"He ill-treats his mother—beats her, I believe," continued my aunt.

"This cannot be true," cried Constance. "Mrs. Granville, tell me."

My mother nodded sadly.

"Alas! I cannot deny it."

Constance arose. "This is awful!" she said, holding on to the back of the sofa. "I could never have believed it."

She put her hand to her forehead. "It is like a bad dream."

"My poor, dear Constance," murmured my mother, rising and putting her arms around her.

My aunt brought up her artillery. "He is thoroughly depraved, and will come to a bad end. His relations are at one on this point."

Constance buried her face in my mother's bosom. "Oh, dear, oh, dear, and I love him so," she sobbed.

In the adjoining room I was becoming uncomfortable.

"We thought it right to tell you," said my aunt, moved by her tears. "Though Alfred begged and implored us not to."

"I could never, never, have believed it," sobbed Constance. "Poor, poor Mrs. Granville."

My mother soothed her.

"How difficult you must have felt it to tell me this," exclaimed Constance, drying her tears. "It was so good of you. I will not give you another thought. To treat his mother so cruelly! Oh, Mrs. Granville, I am so sorry for you."

"It is I am who am sorry for you," cried my mother.

"And no one would have dreamed it. We always thought you were so fond of him, and spoiled him so utterly. And all the time you were hiding your sorrow. How noble of you!"

My mother looked at Aunt Tabitha, who returned her stare.

"Who ever it is," said Aunt Tabitha, whispering. "Find out."

"Where did you meet him, dearest?" whispered my mother.

"Meet him?" Why here, of course," said Constance, with opening eyes.

"Yes, yes, of course," said my mother, mystified.

"I thought you would be pleased and I hurried across to tell you."

"Can Alfred have made a mistake?" muttered my aunt hoarsely.

The two elder ladies stood still in the utmost embarrassment.

"I shall never be happy again," said Constance mournfully.

"Don't say that," implored my mother. "Perhaps there is a mistake."

"How can there be a mistake?" asked Constance, raising her head.

"There can be no mistake," said my aunt hastily.

"How could he be cruel to you?" cried Constance, kissing my mother.

"Cruel to me?" cried my mother.

"You said he was cruel to you."

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