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CHAPTER IX.
DISAPPOINTMENT.

It was nearly half a mile from the Salvation Army hall to the Vasplaines', and Stuart never knew what he said to Una as they walked on. Rhena's look as the door had opened revealed a part of the truth to Stuart. If Rhena had been in Una's place during that half mile, there would have been no question of his determination to decide his destiny at once. As it was Una was at first very gay in her rallying questions and remarks, and then as she neared her home she grew quiet and finally laughing and chilling in her whole attitude toward Stuart. She did not know all, but she guessed the state of Stuart's mind toward Rhena, and she was pained, if indeed a deeper feeling did not enter into her thought, at the sight of the indifference of her old playmate to the beauty and attractiveness he had once seemed to enjoy. She bade him good night abruptly and went in at once, leaving him standing somewhat awkwardly by the door waiting for Louise.

When Louise and Vasplaine finally appeared, Stuart moved down the steps, and without waiting for Vasplaine to say good night he said: "Louise, we had better be going right back. Good night, Vasplaine."

"Good night! Good night, Louise," cried the young man, and he went up the steps at once and into the house. For a few minutes as the two walked back neither said anything. Finally Stuart asked abruptly:

"How long has Vasplaine been calling you 'Louise'?"

"Ever since we were children," replied Louise in a mocking tone. But she was very much excited and never looked so pretty in all her life.

"But not in that tone of voice," replied Stuart. He looked at the face in the fur trimmed hat.

Louise looked back at him with just the faintest indication of a sneer on her lips. "Hal asked me to marry him," she said at last.

"And what did you tell him?" asked Stuart quietly.

"I told him I would."

"The two walked on in silence, broken only by the crisp sound of the dry snow under their feet.

"Do you love him, Louise?" Stuart asked gently.

"Oh, I like him well enough! He is—"

"Stop, Louise! I can't bear to hear you speak that way of such a serious matter. Do you know what sort of a man Vasplaine is?"

Louise was at anger heat in a moment. She wrenched her arm from Stuart's and spoke with a passion she really felt. "No, no! Do you think I spy out his habits? He's as fast as most of the young men, I suppose. What difference does it make? What right have you to pass judgment on him?"

Stuart was staggered at first. Then he recovered himself and replied: "Louise, I love you. You are my sister. I speak as I do because of my knowledge, and I say to you that if you marry Hal Vasplaine you will be a miserable woman. Louise, listen to me." Stuart went on, his love for his sister for the moment causing him to forget his own condition. "This man who has asked you to marry him is—oh, Louise, he will wreck your life! He is!"

"You need not say any more," interrupted Louise coldly. "I have promised to marry him. I like him. I believe I love him even, since your brutal attack on him behind his back. You claim the privilege of marrying beneath you. Let me do the same, if that is what you call it."

Stuart reeled almost as if he had been struck. He had been standing facing Louise since she took her arm from him. He passed his hand across his eyes, and then in a low tone he said:

"Let us go on. We shall never understand each other."

Louise without a word took his arm again, and they went on in silence. By the time they reached the town square most of the lights were out, except in the houses where the sick and dying lay. Everything was wrapped in the quiet of a still winter night. The Salvation Army hall looked cold and bleak, its unpainted siding black with age. There was a light shining from Rhena's room. Their way led right past the house. Stuart trembled as he went by. He feared Louise might say something.

She did not, however, and neither spoke a word until they reached home. Aunt Royal was still up and waiting for them. "You must have walked fast," she said, looking keenly at them both.

"We did," replied Stuart. "It is a very cold night."

He went into the library, where there was an open fire burning in the grate. The rooms were still heavy with the perfume of roses and carnations.

Aunt Royal and Louise followed him. After Louise had said a few words to her aunt, Aunt Royal was as excited as she ever allowed herself to be.

"Louise tells me you object to her marrying young Vasplaine," she said, confronting Stuart abruptly.

Stuart was surprised. He did not think Louise would mention the matter to her aunt. But Louise was thoroughly angry, and small natures like hers are never satisfied to wait long before expressing resentment. It was a very natural thing for her to confide at once in her aunt, being sure in this instance of her perfect sympathy.

"Yes, I do object," replied Stuart firmly. He looked straight into his aunt's face.

"On what grounds?"

"The character of the man," answered Stuart quietly.

"His character! Do you know that the Vasplaines have held the very highest position in the best society for several generations? Has not young Vasplaine been received everywhere in society where you and Louise have been?"

"It is possible that society may have more regard for wealth and a family name than for the little consideration of character and morals. I have heard sometimes that that is the case," said Stuart, with a sad smile.

"Why have you allowed the Vasplaines to come into the house, then, if they are such dreadful people?" asked Louise as she sat in one of the deep easy chairs, with her feet out toward the fire.

Stuart did not reply. He was distracted by the events of the evening. He realized that his home life was disturbed by the conflicting factors which necessarily entered it with all his newer ideas and definitions of life. Nothing could be more certain than the fact that henceforth the lives of his sister and Aunt Royal lay in directly opposite ways from his. He felt the needless irritation of the present discussion and longed to escape from it.

Louise, however, had no intention of letting Stuart go without suffering from a blow she knew so well how to inflict. "Aunt, I told Stuart he ought not to object to my choice if I didn't object to his. I don't think, though, that we shall be disgraced by a Salvation Army alliance in the family. Miss Dwight was presented to Una and her escort this evening, and by the appearance of her face it was easy to see she thought them a very handsome couple."

Stuart clinched his hands tightly as he stood with his back to the fire. The old passion rose in him to its highest point, and nothing but the grace of God kept it from bursting out into a torrent such as in the other days had more than once terrified Louise, reckless as she was in provoking it.

There was a deep silence in the heavily perfumed room. Stuart drew a long breath. Then he looked fearlessly into Aunt Royal's eyes, and with a sudden movement he stood close by his sister.

"Louise," he said, and at first his voice was calm, even loving, "I do not know how you hurt me. I expect to ask Miss Dwight to be my wife, but I will never subject her to the humiliation of living under the roof of a house where—"

He broke off abruptly and went out of the room. He felt unable to finish calmly. Aunt Royal and Louise sat up quite late talking over the whole matter. It is not necessary to enter into it. The whole situation was becoming unbearable so far as Stuart was concerned, so the two women agreed.

"What if Stuart marries her and brings her home here?" Aunt Royal would say.

"Then I shall leave the house, but I don't believe Rhena Dwight will ever marry him," Louise would reply. And there the matter rested for the time being, in the thought of the women.

The next morning Stuart did not appear at breakfast. He left word that he had very important business at the office and could not wait for the late meal to which Aunt Royal and Louise were in the habit of sitting down.

He had reached a point in his feelings where he felt the necessity of telling Rhena all. What Louise had said about that chance meeting at the hall disturbed him seriously. But the great question with him now was to know the truth from Rhena herself.

He spent the forenoon at the office. There was plenty to do. The fever and the want on the part of the miners' families were grim factors now in all Champlion. The other ranges were fast feeling the effects of the double scourge of sickness and suffering. Scores of the miners' children were dying daily. To meet the emergency Stuart used his money lavishly. Everything in the way of medicines and nurses' supplies went out of the office in large quantities. He took a melancholy pleasure in spending his money this way. He could at least relieve some pain, lessen some anguish. It was a drop only in the great ocean of the misery, but he had some satisfaction in contributing that much.

A little after noon word came to him that the child in the cabin at the end of Cornishtown was dying. Stuart had no particular reason for going up there more than to any other cabin where other children were dying, but somehow he felt drawn in that direction, and about 2 o'clock he drove up the narrow wagon road and left his horse and cutter at the same place where he had stopped the night he had found Rhena.

He walked on up the path over the trodden snow thinking of that night. The air was crisp and the sky clear. The whole town behind him lay in its setting of snow dressed hills, beautiful as a picture painted by a master, giving no outward sign of the anguish and

sorrow that beat within the homes of the miners below.

He knocked gently at the cabin door, and Rhena opened it. She colored faintly at sight of him, but without a word beckoned him to enter.

The doctor was kneeling by the bed. It was a child, a little girl, only 10 years old, who was dying. Stuart went and stood at the end of the rude bed. Rhena seated herself close by the doctor. The father of the child was helpless from accident. He lay in the next room. The mother was kneeling by the side of the doctor.

"Is she—is she going—now—doctor? Don't say so. She be young to go!" cried the mother as she leaned over the bed and looked into the wasted face there.

"Yes, she's going. She will soon be out of suffering," replied the doctor, very, very gently. No one was ever more gentle than Dr. Saxon in the presence of the last enemy. He never relaxed his efforts until the last second of life. He looked death in the face with a frown. That was a part of his rough, abrupt character. But he looked the dying and the mourning in the face with the look of a compassionate angel.

Very fast the last great change grew now. The father cried out from the other room that he wanted to see his little girl once more. Stuart offered to bring him in. The doctor nodded, and Stuart went in where the man lay and with Rhena's help succeeded in



They had reached the big stump in the middle of the trail.

getting him into the other room and propped up in a chair where he could see the child. Great tears rolled over his rough, coarse face as he sat there. It was not very long. The doctor made a movement as he held the slender wrist. The eyes opened full on the father as he looked. There was a faint smile. It crossed the face as the sunlight, on a day of low lying clouds when the wind is blowing hard, crosses a meadow. It was gone, and the gray shadow followed fast after. The form stiffened, there was a sigh, another, and that was all. The doctor laid the little hand down and said, "She is gone." He turned his face away from the mother, and Stuart was startled at the look. It was as if Saxon had seen the death he was continually fighting and was enraged at the victory won against his human skill. But he turned again to the mother, who had, after the manner of women among the miners, flung herself over the bed with great shrieks and cries, and lifting her up he half led, half carried, her into the other room and laid her down, sobbing and groaning, on an old couch there. And Stuart could have sworn the doctor's face was as beautiful as mercy and as full of blessing as mortal man's can ever be. When he came back after performing his office for the dead, the doctor went away. Those were days when sleep and rest were strangers to him. He never fully recovered from the terrible strain of that winter.

Rhena remained a little while to do what she could, and Stuart sent a boy who had come up from a neighbor's down for the undertaker and promised all in his power. When Rhena went out, he went with her, and they were soon walking together over the very trail where Stuart had started out the night of Rhena's fall. She had other houses in Cornishtown to visit and needed to save time by the short cut which the upper trail afforded.

Stuart had not asked if he might go with her, and she had neither assented to his company nor rejected it. He had forgotten all about his horse and cutter down the other path. She seemed passive and thoughtful. The scene they had just witnessed affected them both deeply. It was not an unusual sight these days with either, but death never lost its majesty to Stuart, and Rhena was never more exalted in her feeling than in the presence of the great enemy.

There was hardly room in the trail most of the way for two persons. Stuart walked behind her. They were silent for the most part, except a question or two about different sick people, until they reached the big stump in the middle of the trail, the other side of which Stuart had found Rhena lying.

She turned her face a little as she was about to walk around the old landmark, and Stuart spoke to her. He was very pale and trembled. It seemed to him that a great crisis had come for him. When he had spoken the first word, he at once became more master of himself.

"Miss Dwight, I wish to tell you something. Will you allow me to say what I have felt I must say for a long time?"

Rhena looked startled. Her lip trembled. She seemed unable to answer.

Stuart went on. Now that he had made up his mind, he was like his father in the determination that drove him to his purpose with an iron energy that possessed his whole positive nature.

"I have been loving you almost from the first moment I saw you. You must have known it from my manner. I am a poor actor. I have not been able to conceal much, even if I had wished to. But my life has been transformed by all this. I have reached the place where I can no longer be silent. I know that I love you as a man should love the woman whom he asks with all the reverence and joy possible to him to be his wife."

He had spoken, and it was not what he had once thought he might have said. But he was not prepared for the effect of his declaration upon Rhena.

She was dressed as usual in her Salvation Army costume. The face in the army bonnet of blue, with its plain ribbons, was typical of the army faces seen everywhere. And yet while Stuart was speaking and all through the rest of the interview between them he thought, with a certain bewilderment, that it was no longer the Salvation Army girl who stood facing him, but the society woman, Miss Rhena Dwight, daughter of Allen Dwight, the millionaire of New York. And yet she was in still another way removed from him by the very circumstances of her army connections. Rhena was very pale as she spoke.

"Mr. Duncan," she said as she leaned back, with one hand on the stump as if for support, "can you speak to me—tell me—this—after what I saw last night—after—"

"What?" cried Stuart, the color rushing to his face. "Do you mean your seeing me with Miss Vasplaine? We have been old friends. We were boy and girl together. I was simply going home with her from a social gathering at my house. She is nothing to me but an acquaintance."

"I have been told that you were engaged," said Rhena after a slight pause.

"Who told you that?" cried Stuart impulsively. He stepped near Rhena.

"Your sister!" Rhena spoke calmly, looking straight at Stuart, but she was still very pale.

"Louise? She deceived you. It is not true. I never had a thought of Miss Vasplaine except that of a friend, an old acquaintance. Do you believe me when I say so?" Stuart spoke straight on and waited her answer steadily.

"Yes; I believe you," said Rhena quietly.

"Then you believe me when I say I love you? You?"

"Yes; I believe—I think you are a true man, but what you ask is impossible."

Stuart controlled himself. He felt that whatever the crisis might be which now faced him he must be master of himself. It began to grow upon him that perhaps he had not yet won the love of this rarely strong and beautiful woman, as it should be his.

"Why impossible?" he asked, with a gentleness and calmness that surprised himself.

"We live in separate worlds," replied Rhena, with an answering calmness that was possibly as surprising to her. "I have cut myself purposely and for always from the life I once lived. I have no wish to re-enter it. I have chosen my life work. It is a work so different from that of society and the world of which you are a part that to go back to your world would be to turn traitor to all my deepest and best convictions. It is impossible that I should be again as I once was."

Stuart did not reply at once. He looked off over the valley beyond the town to his own house as it stood there on the slope of the hill, palatial in its form and size.

"But I am not really in that world any more. The cause of humanity is my cause now. Do you condemn me to separation from you because I am what I am outwardly? I loathe the forms and selfishness and heartlessness of society as deeply as you do. I would give anything to be other than I am at this moment. If it is simply that which keeps you from—"

He could not finish. It was significant to her that he had not ventured to ask her if she loved him. Neither had he yet spoken her first name. He was a man of rare purpose and power in the emergency that he now faced. He would not expect what was perhaps not yet in her power to give. She was moved deeply. When she spoke again, Stuart had at first a gleam of hope.

"I believe you see the cause of humanity as I see it, Mr. Duncan. I have believed it since that night in the hall when you told me the story of your conversion. It was so like my own experience that I was startled by it. I went home from a gay party a few years ago. I was awakened by a voice. I saw and heard the divine messenger. I went out from my father's house the next day an outcast from kin and friends, and I have never regretted it. But the guilt between you and me is a deep one, even with this common experience. If I were to become your wife"—Rhena spoke the word with difficulty—"it would be at the expense of the life of service I have chosen. It would be—"

She broke off as if afraid to trust her voice. Stuart would not even then take advantage of her emotion to look at her. His gaze was still down the valley.

"Is our Christian faith nothing as a common basis for a common work together? Can we not do more than that to go our own ways alone?" he asked, and his heart was hungry for the love of her, and still he would not take what she did not yet have to give.

Rhena answered quietly: "I cannot. It is not for me to thank you for the greatest honor a good man can give a woman. I am unworthy of it."

"No, no!" Stuart cried at last, turning to her. "I love you. Let me say it even if it may be for the last time." And then he did what he had not thought of doing when he began. But he

ing love in this woman, and he longed for her too much to leave the matter without fully showing her his heart.

He took Rhena's glove from his pocket, the glove he had picked up on the trail that night. "See!" he cried, as he showed it to her. "I passed along this path one night, and it was a night of great beauty to me. I found you lying over there close by the mouth of that pit. I caught you up and carried you down to safety. And for a little while you were mine in my heart's thought, and you could not say me nay." His voice broke in a sob. A man can sob only under certain emotions. Stuart had never felt that before.

As for Rhena, she caught her breath and then stood pale and still. "They told me Dr. Saxon brought me in. Why did they not tell me the truth? Why did he not tell me? I owe you my life!"

It was both a question and a statement. Stuart would not even now anticipate the love that might yet be his. He stood there facing her, silent after that one outburst. At last he said gently, "I would like to keep the glove, may I?"

She did not answer him. He put the glove back in his pocket. She was very, very pale.

He said one more word, "You believe I love you?"

"Yes; I believe it," she answered in a very low voice.

"I shall always love you," he said. He took off his hat. The act was one of reverence. "Some time when I have won your love, as I know I have not yet, I shall speak again," he added slowly. And then he turned and went back over the trail, never once looking behind. If he had—

When he disappeared behind a clump of firs, Rhena knelt down by the old stump and laid her head upon it, and her prayer was very much like the prayer of that night when Louise had called upon her. After awhile she rose and went down the trail. But she was not the same woman. Her heart was shaken for the first time in her life by the love of a great and good man. Ah, it is possible if he had said to her, "Rhena!" she might have said, "Stuart!" and given him all. It was dangerous for her to think of him. She felt as never before. And then the glove, the knowledge of her safety due to him—she trembled. There were times in her feeling when if Stuart had come back she would have said to him: "I love you. Let us go on our way through life together!" And she went on into the next cottage, a look in her eyes that was new to them and an emotion in her heart that she could not suppress.

As for Stuart, he went down into Champlion with a feeling that was not that of defeat or discouragement. It had been a crisis with him. He had at last spoken. He had nothing to regret in all he had said. And in spite of the fact that his answer had been no something told him it was not final. He was the last man in the world to try to argue the woman he loved into loving him. He was not and could not be a pleading suitor for the heart of this woman of all persons in the world. He said to himself the time would come, although he did not attempt to picture when or how, when she would be his as he wanted her to be. With that great thought burning in him he entered upon one of the busiest and most significant weeks of his life.

In the first place, when Sunday came he joined the church. He had already two weeks before gone into the preparatory meeting with Andrew and there recited his experience. It seemed the most necessary act in the world that he should identify himself openly and boldly with other Christians in the organization which Christ loved. There was not a moment's hesitation in Stuart's mind about the duty and privilege of church membership. That was a notable day in his life when Andrew asked him to rise and give assent to the church covenant.

The news that Stuart Duncan was going to join the church was interesting enough to call out a large part of the population of Champlion. Andrew had never seen such a congregation. St. John's was crowded, very largely with the miners and their families. Stuart was the only person received at this communion. When he rose at Andrew's invitation, his face was calm and even beautiful. It was a splendid sight to see these two men facing each other at the communion service. When Stuart knelt to receive the baptism, Andrew's voice trembled for a second over the words, "I baptize thee, Stuart, my brother, disciple of Jesus," and many an eye in the audience moistened. When the bread was passed, Stuart received it from one of the miners who had worked in Champlion mines ever since Stuart was a boy. He was a deacon in St. John's, and Stuart never forgot the look on the old man's face as he handed the plate in at the end of the pew. More than half of Andrew's membership were Cornishmen. It was a day long remembered by them.

And to Stuart there came also as he partook for the first time of the elements a new and serious thought of the fellowship he had begun with these men, nearly all of whom had been in his father's employ. It was true they were of the rudest, most uneducated sort. Their type of Christianity as church members was not very exalted. They were at this very moment engaged in a method of struggle against capital which was contrary to all Stuart's real convictions, but he had reached a point where he looked upon the struggle from a different basis. The men in the church were for the most part prayerful, honest and above all generous with what they possessed. Stuart did not know it, but Deacon Sam Penryck, who passed the bread and wine, had that very morning given one of the suffering families in Cornishtown a third of his own savings which he had stored up for the winter to take him through the strike.