

## CHAPTER X

### JANE MEETS DR. MERCHISON

Nobody disputed my inheritance, for, so far as I could learn, Mrs. Strong had no relatives. Nor indeed could it have been disputed, for I had never so much as hypnotised the deceased. When it was known how rich I had become I grew even more popular in Dunchester than I had been before, also my importance increased at headquarters to such an extent that on a change of Government I became, as I have said, Under-Secretary to the Home Office. Although I was a useful man hitherto I had always been refused any sort of office, because of the extreme views which I professed--on platforms in the constituencies--or so those in authority alleged. Now, however, these views were put down to amiable eccentricity; moreover, I was careful not to obtrude them. Responsibility sobers, and as we age and succeed we become more moderate, for most of us have a method in our madness.

In brief, I determined to give up political knight-errantry and to stick to sober business. Very carefully and in the most conservative spirit I took stock of the situation. I was still a couple of years on the right side of fifty, young looking for my age (an advantage), a desirable parti (a great advantage, although I had no intention of re-marrying), and in full health and vigour. Further, I possessed a large fortune all in cash or in liquid assets, and I resolved that it should not diminish. I had experienced enough of ups and downs; I was sick of vicissitudes,

of fears and uncertainties for the future. I said to my soul: "Thou hast enough laid up for many days; eat, drink and be merry," and I proceeded to invest my modest competence in such a fashion that it brought in a steady four per cent. No South African mines or other soul-agonising speculations for me; sweet security was what I craved, and I got it. I could live with great comfort, even with modest splendour, upon about half my income, and the rest of it I purposed to lay out for my future benefit. I had observed that brewers, merchants and other magnates with cash to spare are in due course elevated to the peerage. Now I wished to be elevated to the peerage, and to spend an honoured and honourable old age as Lord Dunchester. So when there was any shortage of the party funds, and such a shortage soon occurred on the occasion of an election, I posed as the friend round the corner.

Moreover, I had another aim. My daughter Jane had now grown into a lovely, captivating and high-spirited young woman. To my fancy, indeed, I never saw her equal in appearance, for the large dark eyes shining in a fair and spirituelle face, encircled by masses of rippling chestnut hair, gave a bizarre and unusual distinction to her beauty, which was enhanced by a tall and graceful figure. She was witty also and self-willed, qualities which she inherited from her American mother, moreover she adored me and believed in me. I, who since my wife's death had loved nothing else, loved this pure and noble-minded girl as only a father can love, for my adoration had nothing selfish in it, whereas that of the truest lover, although he may not know it, is in its beginnings always selfish. He has something to gain, he seeks his own

happiness, the father seeks only the happiness of his child.

On the whole, I think that the worship of this daughter of mine is a redeeming point in my character, for which otherwise, sitting in judgment on it as I do to-day, I have no respect. Jane understood that worship, and was grateful to me for it. Her fine unsullied instinct taught her that whatever else about me might be unsound or tarnished, this at least rang true and was beyond suspicion. She may have seen my open faults and divined my secret weaknesses, but for the sake of the love I bore her she overlooked them all, indeed she refused to acknowledge them, to the extent that my worst political extravagances became to her articles of faith. What I upheld was right; what I denounced was wrong; on other points her mind was open and intelligent, but on these it was a shut and bolted door. "My father says so," was her last argument.

My position being such that I could ensure her a splendid future, I was naturally anxious that she should make a brilliant marriage, since with monstrous injustice destiny has decreed that a woman's road to success must run past the altar. But as yet I could find no man whom I considered suitable or worthy. One or two I knew, but they were not peers, and I wished her to marry a peer or a rising politician who would earn or inherit a peerage.

And so, good easy man, I looked around me, and said that full surely my greatness was a-ripening. Who thinks of winter and its frosts in the

glow of such a summer as I enjoyed?

For a while everything went well. I took a house in Green Street, and entertained there during the sitting of Parliament. The beauty of the hostess, my daughter Jane, together with my own position and wealth, of which she was the heiress, were sufficient to find us friends, or at any rate associates, among the noblest and most distinguished in the land, and for several seasons my dinner parties were some of the most talked about in London. To be asked to one of them was considered a compliment, even by men who are asked almost everywhere.

With such advantages of person, intelligence and surroundings at her command, Jane did not lack for opportunities of settling herself in life. To my knowledge she had three offers in one season, the last of them from perhaps the best and most satisfactory parti in England. But to my great and ever-increasing dismay, one after another she refused them all. The first two disappointments I bore, but on the third occasion I remonstrated. She listened quite quietly, then said:

"I am very sorry to vex you, father dear, but to marry a man whom I do not care about is just the one thing I can't do, even for your sake."

"But surely, Jane," I urged, "a father should have some voice in such a matter."

"I think he has a right to say whom his daughter shall not marry,

perhaps, but not whom she shall marry."

"Then, at least," I said, catching at this straw, "will you promise that you won't become engaged to any one without my consent?"

Jane hesitated a little, and then answered: "What is the use of talking of such a thing, father, as I have never seen anybody to whom I wish to become engaged? But, if you like, I will promise you that if I should chance to see any one and you don't approve of him, I will not become engaged to him for three years, by the end of which time he would probably cease to wish to become engaged to me. But," she added with a laugh, "I am almost certain he wouldn't be a duke or a lord, or anything of that sort, for, provided a man is a gentleman, I don't care twopence about his having a title."

"Jane, don't talk so foolishly," I answered.

"Well, father," she said astonished, "if those are my opinions at least I got them from you, for I was always brought up upon strictly democratic principles. How often have I heard you declare in your lectures down at Dunchester that men of our race are all equal--except the working-man, who is better than the others--and that but for social prejudice the 'son of toil' is worthy of the hand of any titled lady in the kingdom?"

"I haven't delivered that lecture for years," I answered angrily.

"No, father, not since--let me see, not since old Mrs. Strong left you all her money, and you were made an Under-Secretary of State, and lords and ladies began to call on us. Now, I shouldn't have said that, because it makes you angry, but it is true, though, isn't it?" and she was gone.

That August when the House rose we went down to a place that I owned on the outskirts of Dunchester. It was a charming old house, situated in the midst of a considerable estate that is famous for its shooting. This property had come to me as part of Mrs. Strong's bequest, or, rather, she held a heavy mortgage on it, and when it was put up for sale I bought it in. As Jane had taken a fancy to the house, which was large and roomy, with beautiful gardens, I let my old home in the city, and when we were not in town we came to live at Ashfields.

On the borders of the Ashfields estate--indeed, part of the land upon which it was built belongs to it--lies a poor suburb of Dunchester occupied by workmen and their families. In these people Jane took great interest; indeed, she plagued me till at very large expense I built a number of model cottages for them, with electricity, gas and water laid on, and bicycle-houses attached. In fact, this proved a futile proceeding, for the only result was that the former occupants of the dwellings were squeezed out, while persons of a better class, such as clerks, took possession of the model tenements at a totally inadequate

rent.

It was in visiting some of the tenants of these cottages that in an evil hour Jane first met Dr. Merchison, a young man of about thirty, who held some parish appointment which placed the sick of this district under his charge. Ernest Merchison was a raw-boned, muscular and rather formidable-looking person, of Scotch descent, with strongly-marked features, deep-set eyes, and very long arms. A man of few words, when he did speak his language was direct to the verge of brusqueness, but his record as a medical man was good and even distinguished, and already he had won the reputation of being the best surgeon in Dunchester. This was the individual who was selected by my daughter Jane to receive the affections which she had refused to some of the most polished and admired men in England, and, as I believe, largely for the reason that, instead of bowing and sighing about after her, he treated her with a rudeness which was almost brutal.

In one of these new model houses lived some people of the name of Smith. Mr. Smith was a compositor, and Mrs. Smith, nee Samuels, was none other than that very little girl whom, together with her brother, who died, I had once treated for erysipelas resulting from vaccination. In a way I felt grateful to her, for that case was the beginning of my real success in life, and for this reason, out of several applicants, the new model house was let to her husband as soon as it was ready for occupation.

Could I have foreseen the results which were to flow from an act of kindness, and that as this family had indirectly been the cause of my triumph so they were in turn to be the cause of my ruin, I would have destroyed the whole street with dynamite before I allowed them to set foot in it. However, they came, bringing with them two children, a little girl of four, to whom Jane took a great fancy, and a baby of eighteen months.

In due course these children caught the whooping-cough, and Jane visited them, taking with her some delicacies as a present. While she was there Dr. Merchison arrived in his capacity of parish doctor, and, beyond a curt bow taking no notice of Jane, began his examination, for this was his first visit to the family. Presently his eye fell upon a box of sweets.

"What's that?" he asked sharply.

"It's a present that Miss Therne here has brought for Tottie," answered the mother.

"Then Tottie mustn't eat them till she is well. Sugar is bad for whooping-cough, though, of course, a young lady couldn't be expected to know that," he added in a voice of gruff apology, then went on quickly, glancing at the little girl's arm, "No marks, I see. Conscientious Objector? Or only lazy?"



Then Mrs. Smith fired up and poured out her own sad history and that of her poor little brother who died, baring her scarred arm in proof of it.

"And so," she finished, "though I do not remember much about it myself, I do remember my mother's dying words, which were 'to mind what the doctor had told her, and never to have any child of mine vaccinated, no, not if they crawled on their knees to ask it of me.'"

"The doctor!" said Merchison with scorn, "you mean the idiot, my good woman, or more likely the political agitator who would sell his soul for a billet."

Then Jane rose in wrath.

"I beg your pardon for interrupting you, sir," she said, "but the gentleman you speak of as an idiot or a political agitator is Dr. Therne, my father, the member of Parliament for this city."

Dr. Merchison stared at her for a long while, and indeed when she was angry Jane was beautiful enough to make any one stare, then he said simply, "Oh, indeed. I don't meddle with politics, so I didn't know."

This was too much for Jane, who, afraid to trust herself to further speech, walked straight out of the cottage. She had passed down the model garden and arrived at the model gate when she heard a quick powerful step behind her, and turned round to find herself face to face

with Dr. Merchison.

"I have followed you to apologise, Miss Therne," he said; "of course I had no idea who you were and did not wish to hurt your feelings, but I happen to have strong feelings about vaccination and spoke more roughly than I ought to have done."

"Other people, sir, may also have strong opinions about vaccination," answered Jane.

"I know," he said, "and I know, too, what the end of it all will be, as you will also, Miss Therne, if you live long enough. It is useless arguing, the lists are closed and we must wait until the thing is put to the proof of battle. When it is, one thing is sure, there will be plenty of dead," he added with a grim smile. Then taking off his hat and muttering, "Again I apologise," he returned into the cottage.

It seems that for a while Jane was very angry. Then she remembered that, after all, Dr. Merchison had apologised, and that he had made his offensive remarks in the ignorance and prejudice which afflicted the entire medical profession and were more worthy of pity than of anger. Further, she remembered that in her indignation she had forgotten to acknowledge or accept his apology, and, lastly, she asked him to a garden-party.

It is scarcely necessary for me to dwell upon the subsequent

developments of this unhappy business--if I am right in calling it unhappy. The piteous little drama is played, both the actors are dead, and the issue of the piece is unknown and, for the present, unknowable. Bitterly opposed as I was to the suit of Merchison, justice compels me to say that, under the cloak of a rough unpromising manner, he hid a just and generous heart. Had that man lived he might have become great, although he would never have become popular. As least something in his nature attracted my daughter Jane, for she, who up to that time had not been moved by any man, became deeply attached to him.

In the end he proposed to her, how, when or where I cannot say, for I never inquired. One morning, I remember it was that of Christmas day, they came into my library, the pair of them, and informed me how matters stood. Merchison went straight to the point and put the case before me very briefly, but in a manly and outspoken fashion. He said that he quite understood the difficulties of his position, inasmuch as he believed that Jane was, or would be, very rich, whereas he had nothing beyond his profession, in which, however, he was doing well. He ended by asking my consent to the engagement subject to any reasonable conditions that I might choose to lay down.

To me the shock was great, for, occupied as I was with my own affairs and ambitions, I had been blind to what was passing before my face. I had hoped to see my daughter a peeress, and now I found her the affianced bride of a parish sawbones. The very foundation of my house of hopes was sapped; at a blow all my schemes for the swift aggrandisement

of my family were laid low. It was too much for me. Instead of accepting the inevitable, and being glad to accept it because my child's happiness was involved, I rebelled and kicked against the pricks.

By nature I am not a violent man, but on that occasion I lost my temper and became violent. I refused my consent; I threatened to cut my daughter off with nothing, but at this argument she and her lover smiled. Then I took another ground, for, remembering her promise that she would consent to be separated for three years from any suitor of whom I did not approve, I claimed its fulfilment.

Somewhat to my surprise, after a hurried private consultation, Jane and her lover accepted these conditions, telling me frankly that they would wait for three years, but that after these had gone by they would consider themselves at liberty to marry, with my consent if possible, but, if necessary, without it. Then in my presence they kissed and parted, nor until the last did either of them attempt to break the letter of their bond. Once indeed they met before that dreadful hour, but then it was the workings of fate that brought them together and not their own design.