

A Life's Lesson

MINNIE ALTHORPE was a beautiful girl about nineteen years of age, a light-hearted, merry girl, full of deep feeling, and yet somewhat flighty and capricious in her character.

Her home was that of her elder sister, Mrs. Howard, a matronly dame of the age of thirty, who did all in her power to mitigate the flighty character of the younger born. But Minnie was wilful, and unfortunately, all the world over, wilful girls will have their way.

“Now, Minnie,” said Mrs. Howard to her sister one morning, “I hope and trust you will be careful what you are doing. Donald Garnett is coming down with Howard, and you must act with a little more consistency.”

“In what way?” asked her sister, fanning herself in such a way as to hide her face.

“You must give up that horrid flirtation with that man. Lieutenant Conder,” she continued; “he is not worthy to wipe the shoe of a Donald Garnett.”

“He is a handsome, well-bred gentleman, can play and sing, and knows how to talk to a lady,” was the flippant reply. “I like him.”

“But, as you know, Donald Garnett loves you,” returned Amy Howard, rather tartly.

“Yes,” with a yawn, “he does me that honor, but though young enough, he is so staid.”

“He is an honorable man, a merchant and banker, intent on that business which is to make your life so easy and glorious,” retorted her sister, “while Lieutenant Edward Conder is a fortune-hunter, a man, I believe, of no reputable character.”

“Silence, Amy,” cried Minnie angrily; “I will not allow my friend to be maligned behind his back. He is my friend, and if Donald Garnett is going to begin tyranny before marriage, the sooner he finds another wife the better, that is all I can say. When he meets Edward Conder, I shall watch him.”

“He will not meet Edward Conder here,” was the firm reply; “with James's consent I have forbidden him the house.”

Minnie Althorpe turned upon her with a face crimson with passion, with eyes that blazed with mortification and rage.

“If you are foolish enough to visit the Redburns while he is there, it will be at your own cost and peril,” continued Amy.

Minnie burst into tears, and flounced out of the room. In her heart of hearts, she knew that her sister was right, but pride sustained her.

“I will not be dictated to,” she said to herself, petulantly, as she shut herself in her bedroom, “and I will not be treated like a child. But I will exert my energy—we shall see who will conquer.”

And the foolish girl at once decided to enter upon a contest with a man she respected, esteemed, and perhaps even loved, while keeping up her evil and dangerous flirtation with another man. The female mind is, however, so constituted as to be hard for men to understand at times.

Minnie had been introduced on the previous Christmas—it was now the end of August—to Mr. Donald Garnett, an intimate city friend, of fine, manly character, and excellent position. He was good-looking, *distingue*, of elevated character, and just the man for an elegant and refined woman to look up to.

And Minnie did look up to him considerably, as one much above her in intellect. He was a man among men. Still, the young girl could not help her nature. She was full of exuberant life and spirits, and could not keep them down.

The Rev. Henry Redburn had a son in the army a very good fellow, but not very judicious. He knew Lieutenant Conder to be somewhat fast, and addicted to flirtation. “But then,” thought Henry Redburn, “it is a way we have in the army.” He therefore brought him down, spoke of his family connection and good position, and then introduced him to his family.

Lieutenant Edward Conder was a man who knew what he was about. He was very cautious and very cunning. He knew his game, as he would have said. The man was the more dangerous in that he knew his own wickedness. He made no secret of it in his own soul, and many was the aching heart that knew it too—the hearts of those he had doomed to destruction.

He had at once made a dead set at Minnie. He saw at once that she was rather feeble and foolish, he found out she had ten thousand pounds in her own right, and his plans were at once laid. He was of the handsome barber's block style, with languishing eyes, a pink complexion, a careless face, and had a soft, caressing voice.

He was a singing man, could play, join in all feminine games, and talk all the pretty little slang which some of the dear creatures love so much. He became the greater favorite with Minnie in that, careless and jovial with others, he was with her soft-spoken, tender, and a little melancholy. There is nothing so dangerous in man as well-assumed sadness. It puts a woman off her guard and softens her heart towards him.

So it was with Minnie. Lieutenant Edward Conder adopted in her case a resigned manner which plainly said, “See how I love you, and yet I know that such transcendent loveliness is not for me—no, it is more than I have any right to expect. But he said nothing. The man bided his time. Anything rash or sudden might have spoiled his plans.

“Miss Minnie Althorpe is as good as engaged, Henry,” said one of the Misses Redburn. “This sort of thing is very foolish, you know. Your friend should be warned.”

“I have told him all about it—what more can I do?” petulantly replied Henry. “Miss Althorpe is not a baby. If she likes to throw over a substantial fellow like Garnett for a young lieutenant living at present on his prospects, I can only say that is her look-out.”

“I fear evil will come of it,” said his sister with a deep sigh.

And when evil did come of it, woman-like, she remembered those words.

When Minnie appeared at the luncheon table, she was quieter.

The Howards kept up a very good style at their house at Richmond. Mr. Howard had a good business, and his wife had the interest of her ten thousand, which was settled on herself and children, so that they were able to do things in a pleasant and agreeable way. Mr. Howard left at nine, and returned at five, which was very comfortable.

“What shall you do after luncheon?” asked Mrs. Howard, rather curiously.

“I am going for a walk, as, when Mr. Garnett is here, my liberty will be tolerably circumscribed. I shall pay a farewell visit to the Redburns.”

“Remember that we dine at six, Minnie,” reminded Mrs. Howard, anxiously. “Whatever you do, don't be late. You know how cross Howard will be at any disrespect to his friend.”

Minnie tossed her head, made no reply, and went out to the neighboring rectory, where she found the girls, Henry, and two officers from Hounslow engaged at croquet. Of course, they made way for her. Equally as a matter of course, Lieutenant Conder got hold of her, and presently contrived to be alone with her.

“Your sister, Mrs. Howard,” he said, bitterly, “is a very resolute lady. She has coolly forbidden me the house. What is the reason?”

“Simply,” said Minnie, in an injured tone, “she is mistress of her own house, and is kind enough to dislike you.”

“You do not join in her dislike, Minnie?” he urged, taking her hand in his.

“You mustn't,” she said, feebly. “You know they want me to marry Mr. Garnett. Besides, my sister Amy says such hard things about you.”

There is nothing like the hypocrisy of truth to deceive women.

“Miss Althorpe—Minnie,” he sighed; “young men are not infallible, especially in military circles; but, Minnie, only let me have a wife—a truehearted girl—to lead me on, and I swear by all that is holy that I would reform and become a good man.”

“Have you been a very bad one?” archly asked Minnie. “I begin to fear my sister has told me truth.”

“Bah! No,” he cried; “only foolish, like most young men. Oh, Miss Althorpe, if only I had one like you to be my guardian angel, what might not happen!”

What Minnie would have replied can never be known, as at this moment they were joined by others, and that day they were not alone again.

Minnie was too wise to allow the officer to escort her home. She reached the house at half-past five, to the great delight of Mrs. Howard, and came down to dinner, looking very elegant and beautiful, and to her time. Mr. Garnett's noble face flushed with delight as he welcomed her. Minnie's heart smote her as, during the dinner, she listened to and joined in the conversation. Would she risk losing this man for a score of Edward Conders? She began almost to think she would not. But she kept this knowledge to herself. Amy was delighted with her. Her conduct to Mr. Garnett was beyond all praise. Mrs. Howard could not make it out.

“What [were] you saying, Amy, about this officer?” asked her husband.

“Well, the foolish girl has been doing a considerable amount of flirtation down at the neighboring rectory,” she answered. “I gave her a good scolding this morning. Perhaps, when she went this afternoon, she gave this red-coated gallant a bit of her mind.”

“It is to be hoped so,” returned her husband. “Donald Garnett has very strict notions about a flirtation.”

“Men are such tyrants,” responded Amy, with a mock sigh.

At this moment Donald Garnett proposed a row on the water. It was a favorite pastime of his. They were soon at work, the gentlemen using their oars, Minnie steering. Presently a merry boatload came near them and hailed. It contained the Redburns and their visitors. A brief conversation ensued, but Howard noticed that Lieutenant Edward Conder did not open his mouth. He sat there the picture of sullen resignation. Then the boats parted.

Next day after luncheon, Minnie went up to her room to prepare for a walk.

“Don't go to the Redburns,” said her sister, kindly. “Mr. Garnett is so intensely happy now.”

“I will not go,” replied Minnie, quietly. “I will frankly tell you, however, my motive. I was going to tell the lieutenant that his attentions to me must cease.”

“My darling sister,” cried Amy, embracing her, “but you would not see him at the Redburns! He has been past our house four times in half an hour. Let us have a drive together, and win appetite and beauty.”

Minnie laughed; the pony-chaise and pair was ordered, and away went the two happy sisters. As they turned the first corner they saw the lieutenant, who looked rather confused, and raised his hat. He had been indulging very freely at a hotel, and feared they might notice it. Not an allusion was made to his name, and at five the dutiful wife was at her post at home, seeing to her husband’s dinner. Minnie went to her own room to dress. Her maid was a simple Irish lass.

“Plaze, miss,” she said, showing Minnie a note, “I was to put this into your own hand.”

And she suited the action to the word, Minnie opening and reading.

“Amy—Miss Althorpe, I can bear this suspense no longer,” it said. “I saw you with my detested rival last night. I must have a decision on your part between us, or something terrible will happen. Be in the park at nine. You can make some excuse. Let it be a final meeting unless you are willing to give up Donald Garnett for me.

E. CONDER.”

Minnie shivered all over.

“And has it come to this?” she asked herself. “Is not my insane folly punished enough?” She thought deeply. Well, she would see him [and tell him] that all her love was given to Donald Garnett.

She went down to dinner outwardly calm, but her soul in real agony. How was it to be done? On what accidents some events in life turn. About half past eight there came a telegram for Donald Garnett.

“I must write an answer to this, and post it myself,” he said. “I will not detain you longer than I can help.”

This, with a bow, to Minnie. How relieved she felt. Without any manœuvring she could retire and run out. Their house was near the small entrance of Richmond Park, which was open all night. Lieutenant Conder had named the spot where he would be in a postscript.

At five minutes to nine Minnie flitted out, a close veil over her face, a large cloak round her. She did not want to be seen. She tripped across the road to the gate, and entered, unaware that she had been seen by the one person of all others she would have concealed her foolish escapade from. As the clock struck nine, she stood under the tree indicated by Lieutenant Conder. He was waiting. He would have taken her hand, but she drew back.

“Mr. Conder,” she said, in a clear tone, the truth of which could not be mistaken, “I have come, because, after the foolish way in which I have behaved, it is your due.”

“Minnie, Miss Althorpe,” he cried, in a hypocritical tone, “then all my hopes are dashed to the ground?”

“I never gave you any hope, Mr. Conder,” she calmly replied. “A silly flirtation means nothing. But when once more I found myself in the presence of my noble lover, my very soul shrank with horror against the pitiful part I had been playing.”

“I am to understand, Miss Althorpe,” he now asked, advancing with almost a menacing tone, “that you intend throwing me over for the rich merchant?”

“Mr. Conder!” she cried.

Very beautiful she looked with her soft, dark hair, and girlish figure, her pale, troubled face.

“It is useless talking more,” she went on; “henceforth we are strangers. I love Donald Garnett, and to speak to another is insult.”

“And do you think I will tamely put up with this rejection!” cried the lieutenant; “I who never before loved a woman—”

“Liar!” exclaimed a stern voice close at hand, and then there rang out in the breathless night a sharp, sudden, and terrible sound.

Then there was a dull, heavy fall, and there, on the short, dewy grass, lay stretched a helpless corpse.

Minnie turned, and saw—Donald Garnett, who caught her in his arms. He had heard all. Spellbound, after following her, he had determined the motive of his future wife's interview with another man.

The keepers and others came running up, and then others, and policemen. A shutter was procured, and the procession started for a neighboring inn. Minnie had fainted.

Donald Garnett carried her home and placed her in the hands of her sister. He then returned to the inn. A policeman had accompanied him to Howard's. He knew what it meant. He was suspected. When he reached the inn, the doctor had examined the body. It was quite dead. The man had been shot through the head, the ball passing between his two eyes.

He had died without any warning, or preparation of any kind. Such is the fate of the careless and the reckless.

The officer and Donald Garnett entered the room. An inspector was showing the doctor a small pistol.

“That is the weapon,” said the medical man. “It is not a large instrument, but enough.”

Garnett looked at the corpse with pitying sorrow.

“It was very sudden,” he remarked.

“Sir,” the inspector said, respectfully, “if you would like to make any statement, you can. Remember, I ask for none. Be also aware, sir, that whatever you say will be taken down, and probably used against yourself.”

“I have nothing to hide,” was the placid reply. “Seeing a lady in whom I was interested entering the park by the private gate, at a late hour, I naturally followed her. To my surprise, she met a gentleman,” pointing to the corpse, “practically a stranger to me. A few words passed between them, and I was about to step forward and speak, when, close to my ear, there came a sharp, sudden sound. I knew it was a pistol. The man fell dead.”

The inspector wrote down these words.

“You will have no objection to sign them?” he remarked.

“None,” was the ready answer.

“I ought to take you into custody, sir,” the inspector went on, “but, somehow, hardened as I am, I believe you. Lor', sir, don't say I said it, or I should lose my character. You stay in Richmond to-night?”

“Of course,” was the dry reply.

Donald Garnett left. He knew he was suspected, and would be watched, but he cared not. Strong in his innocence, he feared nothing.

Both Howard and his wife were terribly alarmed. There was no witness but Minnie, and she was in bed really ill, suffering from nervous derangement caused by shock to the system. Next day the doctor declared that she could not possibly appear. The inquest was called, the jury viewed the stiff and rigid body, the handsome face unearthly pale, the false eyes quenched forever. The keepers and the police then gave evidence, as did the doctor. Then Donald Garnett made a statement. They did not put him on oath, but heard his word. Of course this meant suspicion.

Miss Minnie Althorpe was then called. Her doctor then rose and declared that she could not appear for at least four days. The inquest was adjourned for that period, but though Donald Garnett was not arrested, he knew he was under the surveillance of the police. As the whole affair was now in the papers, he did not care to go to town.

He remained at the house of the Howards, never going out, or showing himself. Minnie remained very ill that day and all the next. She seemed to sink into perfect lethargy, and the doctor had to try all means to revive her. Still it was seen that she would sink under it unless extraordinary means were tried.

“See her, Donald,” said Amy.

And Donald went in.

“Can you forgive me?” she cried, hiding her head. “Oh, Donald!”

“My darling, without intending it, I heard all,” he answered, after kissing her; “remember, my dear child, you are very young, and this man was very artful. Be calm, and all will be well. Of course you did not see who fired the shot?”

“No,” she answered.

She had never heard or seen sign of any one in the wood until she saw himself.

“My darling,” he whispered, clasping her to his breast, “you must be calm. I am suspected.”

She sat up with the wild cry of a tigress.

“You suspected?” she gasped.

“Yes, my dear; but all will be explained,” was his firm response. “There was some secret in this man's life that will explain all. I have the ablest detective in London employed. He already thinks he has a clue.”

“Thank heaven!” she cried, and was pillowed in his arms.

And with this she was compelled to rest satisfied. Not so the other. The detective came in the evening.

“The man was a rank bad one,” he said, “and had done many bad things, but as yet we cannot make out the motive anybody could have had to kill him.”

“Well, just so,” mused Donald Garnett, “and yet, Mr. Blunt, unless you ferret out something, I shall be disgraced.”

“Nobody could suspect you, sir,” the officer said in a frank tone.

“A good many do, Blunt,” was his grim reply; “as clear a case of circumstantial evidence as ever was known—angry lover, rival, a cowardly shot in the dark.”

“Not a bit of it, sir,” cried the detective; “anyone who knows you knows better.”

And he retired to hunt up the first clue which he had got. That evening the three sat in Minnie's bedroom; she was much calmer. Nothing would make her absent herself from the inquest. She burned to exculpate her lover. Little did she think that every truthful word she spoke would inculpate him rather. But no one said a word.

She retired early, and the others sat up late, talking sadly and gravely.

Another day passed away, and night came. It was nine o'clock, and Minnie had been left to her nurse. The detective was announced. He came gliding in, rubbing his hands.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said, addressing Donald Garnett, “for interrupting you, but though I have nothing positive, I have one clue. The pistol was bought in Richmond, at eight o'clock on the night before the murder. Where were you, sir?”

“On this sofa, where I am sitting now,” he answered. “I never went out once all the evening.”

“That's an *alibi* clear enough,” the officer said; “but I want more, sir, to clear you altogether.”

“Very good,” remarked Donald; “but what about to-morrow?”

“Well, sir, I will be there before it is over. I have a notion, but no real knowledge. You must go up with all the witnesses, Miss Althorpe included; entreat your lawyer to dawdle as long as he can. I will be there in time.”

And the astute officer retired without saying any more.

All were cheered, though, of course, mightily puzzled at his reticence.

The morning shone bright over the rather sleepy town of Richmond; there was a keen and pleasant wind to temper the heat of the sun, when the carriage, which contained Donald, Mrs. Howard, Amy and Minnie, started for the court, where the occupants of the carriage were ushered into a private room, and thence to a quiet seat. The court was soon constituted, and then the formal evidence was given, the finding of the body, and so on.

He was identified by sad Henry Redburn. Then the clerk, in sonorous tones, called Minnie Althorpe. She was in deep mourning. She entered the witness-box, and gave her evidence clearly, answering each question quietly and distinctly, with never a break or a quiver in her sweet, sad voice, never a variation of tone or look.

She recorded, without any details of the lovemaking, what had passed.

“Mr. Conder wished to make an offer of his hand,” she said, “and not being allowed at my sister's house, asked me to meet him in the park. I had given him a refusal—when—when the occurrence took place.”

“When the pistol was fired you did not see any one?” asked the counsel for the treasury.

“No one.”

“On turning, whom did you see?”

“Mr. Donald Garnett!” she answered, with a sweet, wan smile.

“Oh!” cried the counsel. “Only Mr. Donald Garnett? Had he a pistol in his hand?”

Then she saw the drift of her evidence, and fell back fainting.

“I want to hear no more,” said the counsel.

“Do you wish to make a statement, Mr Garnett?” asked the coroner.

“Yes,” was the calm reply, as he handed Minnie to her sister and the doctor.

Amid breathless silence, Donald Garnett spoke, and told the story as we know it. No questions were asked, and he stood down. A policeman stood ominously near him.

Mr. Howard was about to be sworn, when Blunt appeared on the scene, followed by two policemen, carrying something or somebody.

“I've got the person who did it, your worship,” he said, as the bundle was placed in the chair.

There was a thrilling murmur, and then silence once more. The detective was sworn.

He had found where the pistol was bought on the evening before the murder, and what hour. He had the gunsmith who sold the pistol. It was bought at eight the night before, when Donald was in the bosom of his family. He had found the person who bought the pistol, and that person was in court. He lifted a shawl off the seeming bundle, and a beautiful girl, but in almost the last stage of consumption, was revealed.

She was assisted into the dock and sworn. She had a very faint voice, but there was such silence as enabled all to hear.

“My name is Clara Waters. I am by birth and education a gentlewoman, though compelled to get my living as a governess. I bought the pistol, and I shot Edward Conder, and served him right. I would do it again. He ruined me, and left me to shame and misery. He had always promised marriage, but he never meant to keep his promise. I traced him to Hounslow. Then I found that he was making love to another girl. I followed him, buying a pistol first. On that night I saw him cross to the park, I went after him, hoping to speak. I got up to him. I heard him tell a young lady, who was listening to him, that he had never loved before. I called him a liar, and shot him. Heaven forgive us both!”

To describe the scene that followed were scarcely possible. The poor girl was taken away.

“Wilful murder against Clara Waters,” was the verdict, and Donald was free.

The girl died before her trial, but the family did all that was allowed to soothe her end. Blunt was highly rewarded. Minnie, though a happy wife, is a little grave, and wants no more experiences.

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