DINNA' FORGET.

CHAPTER I.

I am thirty or thereabouts, and I am unmarried. I have been engaged for sixteen years. We parted at the Liverpool landing-stage, Jim and I, in our early teens, and we have not seen each other since. But I still wear his ring. It is a mourning ring, and contains hair. I don't know whose, and I don't suppose Jim knows. The ring came into his possession with the rest of his mother's effects, and he was too young at the time of her death to enquire about the hair. It did not occur to either of us that the ring was an unsuitable one for the purpose; it was the only one Jim had, and he placed it on my finger with a solemnity that awed me.

"Don't forget me," he pleaded, the tears he was too manly to shed almost blinding his eyes. "Oh, my dear little Pat, don't forget me! I am going away to make my fortune, so that we may get married. Promise me, with your hands in mine, that you will be true to me for ever and ever."

It seemed a big promise, and the magnitude of it made me cry. But I loved Jim better than any one else in the world, except my guardian; so in a choked voice I repeated the words after him, and he said I was never to forget that I was engaged. Then he told me to put my arms round his neck and kiss him, and I did that too, though there were a number of people about, and my guardian was smiling curiously. Jim had trained me to habits of obedience, and I knew he would stand no nonsense at this supreme crisis in our lives.

He was four years older than I, and very big, and strong, and handsome, whereas I was but small for my age, an elfish little creature, with great dark eyes and a quantity of curly, unmanageable nut-brown hair. I don't suppose any one but Jim ever thought me pretty.

"Pat," he would say, "I'm going to kiss some colour into your cheeks; that is all you want to make you beautiful. A real princess you will be some day, and sit upon a throne—that is, one of the best drawing-room chairs, you know. And from all quarters of the globe, by which I mean the city, princes—merchant princes, you understand—will come and worship you. They will fall down on their kness, and they will say, 'Be mine, fair lady.' That is what they will say," commented Jim, puckering his brow perplexedly; "but they will be quite wrong, because you are not fair at all, but dark. Then you will throw back your head—so, and you will reply, haughtily, 'Begone, every one of you! For I belong to Jim, and if he were to come in and find you here, there would be bloodshed.'"

I demurred a little to this, for I was a romantic child, with my head crammed full of fairy lore, and this fancy picture of prostrate princes appealed to me.

"Who says I belong to you?" I asked mutinously.

"I say so," Jim replied, his blue eyes flashing, "and before you are many minutes older you will say so yourself."

He seized me in his arms, and marching to the wall that enclosed our garden, placed me upon it. Then he removed the ladder and sauntered away, his hands in his pockets, and his nose in the air. In about five minutes he returned, and asked me politely if I belonged to him. I answered meekly that I did, and I have belonged to Jim ever since.

It was the greatest nonsense, but it was such sweet nonsense; and when it was decided that Jim should go out to his uncle in New Zealand, we regarded our careers as almost at an end. We began to take short and gloomy views of life, relinquished our games and mischievous practices, and resolutely declined to entertain the idea that our hearts were still intact. We begged the cook—and there was something heroic about this—to be less prodigal with her sweetmeats, for, privately, we were a good deal ashamed of our appetites.

I think Jim felt the parting most—his was the deeper, stronger nature—but I did most of the crying, and I cried consistently every day for a week after the vessel had sailed. Then I went back to school, and the first words I heard, spoken in tones of sincerest conviction, were:

"My goodness, Patricia, how ugly you've grown! Whatever have you been doing?"

"Getting engaged," I answered, with dignity—but I cried no more after that.

None of the heroines I read about ever fretted to the extent of making themselves ugly. Aftr bathing their faces in warm water they always looked more beautiful than ever, because of a "little touch of languor that served to heighten their charms." I lost no time in testing the hot water cure, and then I peered anxiously in the glass. Alas! I saw no beauty or languor or charm of any sort. Only a small, white, woebegone face, ruffled hair pushed back, and big brown eyes full of a kind of wistful entreaty—and next day I wrote to Jim telling him how ugly I had grown, and offering to release him from our engagement.

When I told my guardian, he gave a funny little cough.

"My Patricia," he said, lingering fondly over the name, it is too early for you to trouble your pretty head about such matters. It will all come soon enough; too soon, maybe, for your peace of mind."

He sighed heavily, and I drew his head on to my shoulder, kissing and comforting him as was my wont when he seemed in trouble.

"Sweet, tender lips," he murmured; "so like your mother's, child!"

But I afterward heard him remark to his housekeeper, Martha Hewitt, that they two—meaning himself and Martha — were frivolous, featherheaded creatures compared with the children of the present day.

"An odder pair,' he said, "was surely never sent to plague an old bachelor!"

I think he meant "bless," but plague was the word he used.

My guardian's brother, Mr James Hurrell, to whom Jim had gone, was a bachelor, too; and there had been one other brother, Jim's father, who had died of fever while marching at the head of his regiment to Coomassie. Mrs Hurrell never recovered from the shock, and she died about the same time as my own mother, who was also a widow. I had no relations living that I knew of, and Jim always declared he was glad of it.

"Aunts maul one so," he said, "and male cousins might have given trouble."

Ever alert for information, I was anxious to know why male cousins might have given more trouble than female cousins. But Jim, who was very lordly in his ways, said I must understand once for all that male cousins might have given trouble, and that I must not ask any questions.

In due time his answer to my letter arrived. He said it was impossible I could have grown so ugly in so short a time, but in any case I might have known that it would make no difference in his feelings. "Ugly or not, I intend to marry you," concluded Jim severely, "so don't let me hear any more such rot. Remember that you are my promised wife, and that I shall come home and claim you as soon as I have made my fortune." Alas! that letter was written sixteen years ago, and Jim's fortune is not made yet.

CHAPTER II.

As time passed, as the weeks lengthened into months, and the months rolled on into years, I came to regard that little scene enacted at the Liverpool landing stage as mere childish folly—an incident to be remembered only with an amused smile, or a ripple of laughter, as I glanced at the ring on my finger. That sombre pledge of my betrothal had become a fixture. At first it was the recollection of Jim's tear-dimmed eyes which rose up between me and any half-formed resolution to discard the ring. Afterwards it was my physical development that held it fast.

At eighteen there was no longer any question of my growing ugly. My glass told me wondrous tales of my beauty, and my portrait, painted by a Liverpool artist, had the effect of making him wildly and most unreasonably jealous. Our engagement was to him a definite and positive fact; he clung tenaciously to the hope of our future union, and his letters spoke eloquently of the love with which his heart was full.

I used to wonder how with so little fuel he contrived to keep the fire of his love for me burning so steadily. I should have wondered still more had I known the passionate intensity of that love. In my thoughtlessness I never realised that the years passing so lightly and pleasantly over my head were years of toil and anxiety to poor Jim, whose happiest hours were those spent in writing to his little sweetheart at home.

"I am eating my heart out, here in Invercargill," he wrote me once, "waiting for you, Pat; working for you, dear; wearying for you always. The probation is long, my darling, and at times I have need of all my patience and courage. Then it is that the thought of you strengthens and sustains me. You are my star of consolation, my one hope, one thought, one dream in the world. Oh, Pat, be true to me! Don't forget your promise—don't forget. . . ."

"Don't forget! don't forget!" that was ever Jim's cry, and I would ask myself, laughing, how, with so many and such urgent reminders it was possible for me to forget. Dear, generous, faithful-hearted Jim! I was not worthy of him. But I did my best. I tried to live up to the high ideal he had formed of me, and I endeavoured to infuse into my letters some of the impulsive warmth of my childish affection. The sad truth, however, remained—that the correspondence which was all the world to him, simply bored me.

But if I did not love Jim in the way he desired, I certainly did not love anyone else; and for the jealous fears which haunted him he had no cause whatever. Truth to tell, I found men, as a rule, disappointing, in many instances downright dull; and I looked in vain, among the many suitors for my hand, for the hero of my dreams, the ideal lover who should enchain my mind as well as heart and be at once my companion and my king!

He never came; and as time passed I grew more than reconciled to his absence—grew, indeed, to regard my freedom and independence as priceless possessions. A husband, I reflected, would be a very undesirable and unnecessary appendage. He would probably be a talker, he would certainly be a hindrance to me in my writing, and for aught I knew he might even be a tyrant! And for love? Well, I had my guardian, and I wanted no one else.

Some gentlemen were discussing me at a ball, and I was so placed as to make escape impossible.

"Patricia Lang," said one; "oh, yes, you are right! Absolutely without heart, a beautiful statue—nothing more."

"I'm not so sure about that," said another. "See her with her guardian! Mr Hurrell, at all events, does not find her heartless. Rather, I should say, call her a beautiful enigma—and as much so to herself as to anyone else. The girl is for ever looking for something—looking vainly, as it would seem. It's curious, pathetic even, to watch her at each fresh introduction. Hope, expectation, indifference, disappointment, are depicted successively on her expressive face. Evidently she finds us in the last degree tedious and uninteresting."

"It's 'copy' she's looking for," murmured a deep bass voice. "Beware of a woman who writes, for it is just these, with their analytical minds and their heads full of learning who do all the mischief. Their very coldness is a provocation and a challenge. I wonder how many hearts Miss Lang has broken this season. What, in Heaven's name, is she waiting for?"

Ah, that was just it! What was I waiting for?

CHAPTER III.

When I was twenty-six I lost my dearly-loved guardian. He passed away peacefully, his hand in mine, and the story of his love for my mother fresh upon his lips. Her name, Patricia, like my own, was the last word he uttered, and there was a world of tenderness in his low accents.

"She was the best and sweetest, just as she was the most beautiful woman that ever lived. . . . Your father met her first. Had it been otherwise—but I have never allowed my thoughts to dwell upon that. . . The joy of loving her was great, and a man cannot but be better for having known and worshipped such a woman. . . Did she know? Yes, and reproached herself, as she had never any cause to do, for having spoiled my life. . . She made it the richer and fuller for the passing sunshine of her presence. . . 'We needs must love the highest when we see it,' and if she had lived—ah, well! God did not so will it. . . She left you, her greatest treasure, to my care. Tell me, my Patricia, whether I have redeemed the promise I made to your mother twenty years ago."

I could not speak for the great sob that rose in my throat, but I bent my face to his, and I think he understood and was satisfied.

This was my first real sorrow. I had fretted sadly for Jim, but the grief of a girl of twelve is not lasting—and I had my guardian then. Now I felt quite alone in the world, and had Jim happened to return in these days of my desolation, he might have carried the fortress of my heart by storm and married me off-hand.

I did not take kindly to the friends and acquaintances who, with the best intentions, sought to comfort me. I shut myself up and refused to be comforted. In the end my health broke down, and Martha Hewitt, who was devoted to me, came forward with a bold proposition.

"I've been thinking, Miss Patricia," she said, "that it will be well for us to leave this place. It is not home any longer without the master, and you are just fretting yourself to death. I don't know what Mr. Jim would say if he saw you now—and after charging me so pertickler to take good care of you, too!"

I twisted the little mourning ring round and round on my finger; it seemed to get looser every day.

"Where could we go?" I asked listlessly.

"We might go and live in Liverpool," suggested Martha, who loved a city—and I caught at the idea.

In a city it would be possible to lose oneself, and obtain the repose which is denied one in the suburb. Here I could not stir twenty yards from my own door without encountering a dozen or more acquaintances, and their sociability was appalling. How they talked! It got on to my nerves at last, and Martha's plan seemed to offer a ready and effectual means of escape.

The reluctance I should otherwise have felt to leaving the Manor House was lessened in great measure by the spoliation which had for many years been going on around it. Every inch of ground had been seized upon by the ubiquitous builder, the sound of his hammer was ever in one's ears. All day long, carts laden with bricks and timber went grinding past our very gates. Houses and shops sprang up in every direction. A gymnasium was built, a Technical Institution, a Town Hall.

Picturesqueness was fast giving place to conventionality. The hills that I loved were in process of being levelled and laid out in prim lawns and gardens. A recreation ground was threatened, a marine lake and promenade were promised. Rumours reached me of diabolical designs upon the shore; plans of the contemplated improvements were on view in a certain shop-window. They made me shiver. It seemed only a question of time ere the District Council would lay ruthless, reforming hands on the sea itself. The sunsets, happily, were above and beyond its reach, and on no part of our coast are they more beautiful—as Turner, who came there to paint them could testify were he still living.

And the noises! Steam-rollers, school-board children, and street organs made the place a pandemonium; while bicycles rendered the life of the poor pedestrian about as intolerable as it could be. Herein we paid heavily for our exceptionally good roads.

place a pandemonium; while bicycles rendered the life of the poor pedestrian about as intolerable and insecure as it well could be. Herein we paid heavily for our exceptionally good roads.

Of the Waterloo of sweet memories and musings—the dear, primitive, peaceful Waterloo of my earliest recollections—not a trace remains. And when I hear others extol the