

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen  
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo  
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm  
Garnett Engels Byron Schiller  
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka  
Cotton Dostoyevsky Hall  
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis  
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac  
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane  
Burroughs Verne  
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch  
Homer Tolstoy Whitman  
Darwin Thoreau Twain  
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott  
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte  
London Descartes Cervantes Wells Hesse  
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# **A Crooked Path A Novel**

Mrs. Alexander

# Imprint

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## CHAPTER I.

### "GATHERING CLOUDS."

The London season had not yet reached its height, some years ago, before the arch admitting to Constitution Hill had been swept back to make room for the huge, ever-increasing stream of traffic, or the plebeian 'bus had been permitted to penetrate the precincts of Hamilton Place. It was the forenoon of a splendid day, one of the earliest of June, and at that hour the roadway between the entrance to Hyde Park and the gate then surmounted by the statue of the Duke of Wellington on his drooping steed was comparatively free, when two gentlemen coming from opposite directions recognized each other, and paused at the gate of Apsley House—the elder, a stout, florid man of military aspect, middle age, and average height, with large gray mustache and small, slightly bloodshot eyes; the younger, who was tall and bony, might have been thirty, or even forty, so grave and sedate was his bearing, although his erect carriage, elastic step, and clear keen dark eyes suggested earlier manhood.

Both had the indescribable well-groomed, freshly bathed look peculiar to Englishmen of the "upper ten."

"Ha! Errington! I didn't know you were in town. I thought you were cruising somewhere with Melford, or rustivating at Garston Hall. I think your father expected you about this time."

"I don't think so. I was summoned by telegraph from Paris. My father was seized with a paralysis last week. He had just come up to town, and for a few days was dangerously ill, but is now slowly recovering."

"Very sorry to hear of it. A man of his stamp would have been of immense value to the country. He had begun to take a very leading part in local matters. I trust he will come round."

"I fear he will never be the same again. I doubt if he will be able to direct his own affairs as he used." [Pg 6]

"That's bad! You are not in the business, I believe?"

"No; I never took any part in it. I almost regret I did not. It would, I imagine, be a relief to my father, now that his mind is less clear, to know that I was at the helm. But we have a capital man as manager, quite devoted to the house. I shall get my father down to the country as soon as I can, and I trust he'll come round."

"No doubt he will. He was wonderfully hale and strong for his years."

"Ay! how d'ye do, Bertie?" interrupted the first speaker, holding out his hand to a young man who came up from Hyde Park and seemed about to pass with a smile and a nod. "Who would have thought of meeting you in these godless regions? I hear you are busy 'slumming' from morning till night."

"Well, Colonel," returned Bertie—a slight, fair, boyish-looking man—"I am so far false to my new vocation as to have lost some irrevocable moments looking at the horses and horsewomen in the Row."

"Aha! the old leaven, my dear boy! You are on the brink of perdition.—Don't you know Bertie Payne?" he continued, to his newly met friend. "He was one of my subs before he renounced the devil and all his works. He was with us at Barrackbore when you were in India."

"I do not think we have met," the other was beginning, when a young lady—toward whom the Colonel had already cast some sharp, admiring glances as she stood on the curbstone holding a hand of the smaller of two little boys in smart sailor suits—uttered a cry of dismay. The elder child had rushed into the road, as if to stop a passing omnibus, not seeing that a hansom was coming up at speed.

The young man called Bertie dashed forward, and barely succeeded in snatching the child from under the wheel. A scramble of horses' feet, an imprecation or two shouted by the irritated driver, a noisy declaration from the "fare" that he should lose his train, and the scuffle was over.

The little man, held firmly by the shoulder, was marched back to his young guardian.

"Thank you!—oh, thank you a thousand times! You have saved his life!" she exclaimed, fervently, in unsteady tones. Then to the child: "How could you break your promise to stay by me, Cecil? You would have been killed but for this gentleman!"

"I wanted to catch the 'omnibus' for you, auntie!" he cried, with an irrepressible sob, though he gallantly tried to hold back his tears.

"Hope the little fellow is none the worse of his fright," said the Colonel, advancing and raising his hat. "Can I be of any use?—can I call a cab?"

"No, thank you; I will take an omnibus and get home as soon as I can. Cecil will soon forget his fright, I fear—"

"Sooner than you will," remarked Bertie. "There is a Royal Oak omnibus. Will that do?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Come along, then, my young man; I will not let you go."

Bertie put the trio into the vehicle, and the lookers-on saw that he shook hands with "auntie" as the conductor jumped on his perch and they rolled on. [Pg 7]

"Gad! there's a chance for you!" cried the Colonel as Bertie joined him. "An uncommon fine girl, by George! What a coloring! and a splendid pair of black eyes!"

"I suspect extreme fright did a good deal for both, poor girl. Her eyes are brown, not black."

"Brown! Nonsense! Didn't *you* think they were black?"

"I did not observe them," returned the grave personage he addressed, indifferently. "The boy had a narrow escape. I must say good morning," he added.

"Stop a bit," cried the Colonel. "I must see you again before you leave town. Dine with me to-morrow at the Junior. And, Bertie—"

"Thanks, no, I am engaged." He said good-by and walked on.

"Queer fellow that," said the Colonel, looking after him. "He got into some money troubles in India, left the army, and got converted. Now he is not exactly a Salvation soldier, but something of the kind. He'll be at you one of the days for a subscription to convert the crossing sweepers or some such undertaking. But you'll dine with me to-morrow. I'll tell you all the Clayshire gossip."

"Thank you, I shall be very happy."

"Then good-by for the present, I am engaged to lunch to meet one of the prettiest little widows you ever saw in your life, but she has no cash. Here, hansom," calling to the driver of a cab which was passing slowly. "I am a little late." He jumped in and drove off.

His friend, with a slight grave smile, continued his walk to the Alexandria Hotel, the portals of which received him.

Meantime the hero of the cab incident sat very demurely by his young aunt, as the omnibus rolled slowly up Park Lane, occasionally stealing inquisitive glances at her face.

"You have been a *very* naughty boy, Cecil!" she exclaimed as her eyes met his. "How could I have gone home to mamma if I had been obliged to leave you behind?"

"But you needn't, you know; you could have tied me up in a bundle and taken me back. Mamma would have known it wasn't your fault."

"I am not so sure of that, and you have made poor Charlie cry," — drawing the younger boy to her side.

"Charlie is just a baby," contemptuously.

"He is a better boy than you are." Silence.

"Auntie, do you think the gentleman who pulled me back was the old gentleman's son?"

"No, I do not think he was."

"Why don't you, auntie?"

"I can hardly say why."

"I have seen that gentleman—the old gentleman—in Kensington Gardens," said little Charlie, nestling up to his aunt. "He spoke to mammy the day she took me to feed the ducks."

"I think that is only a fancy, dear."

"No; I am quite sure."

"Oh, you are always fancying things; you are a silly," cried [Pg 8] Cecil, now quite recovered, and turning to kneel upon the seat that he might look out, thereby rubbing his feet on the very best "afternoon" dress of a severely respectable female, whose rubicund face expressed "drat the boy!" as strongly as a face could.

The rest of the journey was accomplished after the usual style of such travels when the aunt and nephews went out together. Cecil was constantly rebuked and made to sit down, and as constantly resumed his favorite position; so that he ultimately reached home with beautifully clean shoes, having wiped "the dust off his feet" effectually on the garments of his fellow-passengers, while his little brother nestled to his auntie's side and gazed observantly on his fellow-travellers, arriving at curious conclusions respecting them, to be afterward set forth to the amusement of his hearers.

Leaving the omnibus at the Royal Oak, the trio diverged to one of the streets between that well-known establishment and the Bayswater Road—a street which had still a few trees and small semi-detached villas, with front gardens left at one end, the relics of a past when Penrhyn Place was "quite the country"; while at the other, bricks, mortar, scaffolding, and a deeply rutted roadway indicated the commencement of mansions which would soon swallow up their humbler predecessors.

At one of these villas, the garden of which was tolerably neat, the little boys and their aunt stopped, and were admitted by a smart but not over-clean girl, who welcomed the children with a cheerful, "Well, Master Cecil, you are just in nice time for dinner! Come, get your things off; your gran'ma has a treat for you."

"Has she? Oh, what is it? Do tell, Lottie!"

"Don't mind, dear, if you are tired; your morning-gown will do very well, as we are alone."

"No, no; I must honor Cecil's birthday with my best dress. These trifles are important."

"I suppose so," returned her daughter, looking after her gravely, as she left the room.

Mrs. Liddell was tall, and the lines of her figure considerably enlarged. Yet she had not quite lost the grace for which she was once remarkable. Her light brown hair had a pale look from the increasing admixture of gray, and her blue eyes seemed faded by much use. It was a kind, thoughtful, worn face from which they looked, yet it could still smile brightly.

"She looks very, very tired," thought her daughter. "I must make her lie down if I can; it is so hard to make her rest!" She too looked uneasily at the mass of writing on the table, and then went away to remove her out-door attire.

The birthday dinner gave great satisfaction. It was crowned by a plum-pudding, terrible as such a compound must always be in June; but it was a favorite "goody" with the young hero of the day. Grandmamma made herself as agreeable as though she was one of a party of wits, and drank her grandson's health in a bottle of choice gooseberry, proposing it in a "neat and appropriate" speech, which gave rise to much uproarious mirth and delight. At last the feast was over; the children retired to amuse themselves with a horse and a wheelbarrow—some of the birthday gifts—in the back garden [Pg 9] (a wilderness resigned to their ravages), and Mrs. Liddell and her daughter were left alone.

"Now, mother, *do* come and lie down on the sofa in the drawing-room. I see you are out of sorts. You hardly tasted food, and you are dreadfully tired; come and rest. I will read you to sleep."

"No, Kate; there can be no rest for me, my darling," returned her mother, rising, and beginning to put the plates and glasses together with a nervous movement. "I *am* out of sorts, for I have had a great disappointment. *The Family Friend* has refused my three-volume novel, and I really have not the heart to try it anywhere else after such repeated rejections. At the same time Skinner & Palm write to say they cannot use my short story, 'On the Rack,' for five or six

months, as they have such a quantity of already accepted manuscripts."

"How provoking!" cried Katherine. "But come away; the drawing-room is cooler; let us go there and talk things over."

Mrs. Liddell accepted the suggestion, and sank into an arm-chair, while her daughter let down the blinds, and then placed herself on a low ottoman opposite her.

There was a short silence; then Mrs. Liddell sighed and began: "I counted so much on that short story for ready money! Skinner always pays directly he has published. Now I do not know what to do. If I take it back I may fail to dispose of it, yet I cannot wait. But the novel—that is the worst disappointment of all. I suppose it was foolish, but I felt *sure* about that."

"Of course you did," cried Katherine, eagerly. "It is an excellent story."

"It is not worse than many Santley brings out," resumed Mrs. Liddell; "but one is no judge of one's own work. It was with reluctance I offered it to *The Family Friend*, and you see—" her voice faltered, and she stopped abruptly.

Katherine knew the tears were in her eyes and swelling her heart. She restrained the impulse to throw her arms round her; she feared to agitate her mother; rather she would help her self-control.

"Well, dear, I am no great judge, but I am quite sure that such a story as yours must succeed sooner or later. So we will be patient."

"Ah! but, Katie, the landlord and the butcher will not wait, and, my child, I have only about five pounds. I made too sure of success for I did so well last year. Then Madame de Corset will soon be sending in her bill for that famous dress of Ada's, and she will want the money she lent me."

"Then Madame de Corset must wait," said Katherine, firmly. "Ada is really your debtor. Where could she live at so small a cost as with you? Where could she be so free to run about without a thought for the children? What has become of her? Couldn't she stay with Cecil on his birthday?"

"She is gone to luncheon with the Burnetts. It is as well to keep up with them; their influence might be useful to the boys hereafter; but I do wish I could pay her."

"I wish you could, for it would make you happier; but she really owes you ten pounds and more." [Pg 10]

"What shall I do about that novel? If I could get two hundred—even one hundred—pounds for it, I should do well. I began to hope I might make both ends meet with my pen. Oh, Katie dear, I am ashamed of myself, but for the first time in my life I feel beaten. I feel as if I could not come up to time again. It has been such a long, weary battle!" She pressed her handkerchief to her eyes.

"I wish *I* could give you rest, darling mother!" said Katherine, taking her hand and fondling it. "I fear I have been too useless—too thoughtless."

"You have done all you could, my child; one cannot expect much from nineteen. But I wish—I wish I could think of any means of deliverance from my present difficulty. A small sum would suffice. Where to find it is the question. I counted too much on those unlucky manuscripts, and now I do not know where to turn; I see a vista of debt." A sudden fit of coughing interrupted her.

"You have taken cold, mother," cried Katherine. "I heard you coughing this morning. I was sure you would suffer for sitting near the open window in the study last night."

"It was so hot!" murmured Mrs. Liddell, lying back exhausted.

"Yes, but it was also frightfully damp. Tell me, mother, is there anything we can sell?—anything—"

Mrs. Liddell interrupted her. "Nothing, dear. The few jewels I had preserved went when I was trying to furnish this house. I fancied we should do well in a house of our own, and I was so anxious to make a home for my poor boy's widow!"

"When do you expect any more money?"

"Not for nearly two months, and then another quarter's rent will be due."

"Mother," said Katherine, after a moment's silence, "would not my father's brother, of whom I heard you speak, help you? It is dreadful to ask, but he is so near a kinsman, and childless."

"It is useless to think of it. He and your father quarrelled about money, and he is implacable. His only child, a son, opposed him, and he drove him away. Poor fellow! he was killed in Australia."

"Why have hard-hearted wretches heaps of money, while kind, generous souls like you never have a farthing?"

"That is a mystery of long standing," said Mrs. Liddell, with a faint smile. "Katie, I cannot think or talk any more. I will go and lie down in my own room. There neither Ada nor the children can disturb me. Oh, my darling, how can I ever die in peace if I leave *you* to do battle with the bitter, bitter world unprovided for?" Her voice quivered, and the hand she laid on her daughter's trembled.

"Do not fear for me, mother. I am tougher and more selfish than you are. It is time I worked for you. How feverish you are! Come up to your own room. You will see things differently when you have had a little sleep. If the worst comes, *I* will tell Ada that we must give up the house and go back to lodgings. We never had difficulties before we came here."

"No, for we never had debts. Now I have, and I have this house for nearly three years longer. It is not so easy to shake off engagements as you would a cloak that had grown too heavy."

So saying, Mrs. Liddell rose and ascended to the room she shared [Pg 11] with her daughter, whom she allowed to take off her dress and put on her wrapper, to arrange her pillows, to bathe her brow in eau-de-cologne and water, and soothe her with those loving touches, those tender cares, that the heart alone can prompt, till in spite of the cloud and thick darkness that hid her future, Mrs. Liddell was calmed by the delicious sense of her daughter's love and sympathy.

"I will make a list of editors," said Katherine—"I mean those whom you have not tried—and go round to them myself. Perhaps I may bring you luck."

"Yes; your young life is more likely to have fortune on its side: the fickle jade has forsaken me."

Katherine made no reply beyond a gentle kiss. She sat silently by her mother's side, till feeling the hand that held hers relax its hold, she slowly and softly withdrew her own, comforted to perceive that balmy sleep had stolen upon the weary woman.

Still she sat there thinking with all the force of her young brain, partly remembering, partly anticipating.

Of her father she had scarce any knowledge. She was but four years old when he died, and her only brother was nearly fourteen. The eldest and youngest of Mrs. Liddell's children were the survivors of several.

Katherine's memory of her childish days presented the dim picture of a quaint foreign town; of blue skies, bright sunshine, and abundant vegetation; of large rooms and a smiling black-eyed attendant in a peculiar head-dress; of some one lying back in a large chair, near whom she must never make a noise. Then came a change; mother always in black, with a white cap, and often weeping, and of colder winters, snow and skating—a happy time, for she was always with mother both in lesson and play time, whilst Fred used to go away early to school. Next, clear and distinct, was the recollection of her first visit to London, and from this time she was the companion and confidante of her mother. They were poor—at least every outlay had to be carefully considered—but Katie never knew the want of money. Then came the excitement and preparation attending Fred's departure for India, the mixture of sorrow and satisfaction with which her mother parted from him, of how bitterly she had cried herself; for though somewhat tyrannical, Fred had been always kind and generous.

How well she remembered the day he had left them never to return—how her mother had clasped her to her heart and exclaimed: "You must be all in all to me now, Katie. I have done but little for you yet, dear, Fred needed so much."

A spell of happy, busy life in Germany followed, enlivened by long letters from the young Indian officer, whose career seemed full of promise. But when Katherine was a little more than thirteen sor-

row fell upon them. Fred's letters had become irregular; then came a confession of weakness and debt, crowned by the supreme folly of marriage, concluding with a prayer for help.

Mrs. Liddell was cruelly disappointed. She had hoped and expected much from her boy. She believed he was doing so well! She told all to Katie, who heartily agreed with her that Fred must be helped. Some of their slender capital was sold out and sent to him, [Pg 12] while mother and daughter cheerfully accepted the loss of many trifling indulgences, drawing the narrow limits of their expenditure closer still, content and free from debt, though as time went on Katherine cast many a longing glance at the world of social enjoyment in which their poverty forbade her to triumph.

Mrs. Liddell had always loved literature, and her husband had been an accomplished though a reckless and self-indulgent man. She had wandered a good deal with him, and had seen a great variety of people and places. It occurred to her to try her pen as a means of adding to her income, and after some failures she succeeded with one or two of the smaller weekly periodicals. This induced her to return to London, hoping to do better in that great centre of work. Here the tidings of her son's death overwhelmed her. Next came an imploring letter from the young widow, who had no near relatives, praying to be allowed to live with her and Katherine—sharing expenses—as the pension to which an officer's widow and orphans were entitled insured her a small provision.

So Mrs. Liddell again roused herself, and managed to furnish very scantily the little home where Katherine sat thinking. But the addition to their income was but meagre compared to the expenses which followed in the train of Mrs Frederic Liddell and her two "little Indian boys."

All the efforts of the practical mother and daughter did not suffice to keep within the limits they dreaded to overpass. Mrs. Liddell's pen became more than ever essential to the maintenance of the household, while the younger widow considered herself a martyr to the most sordid, the most unnecessary stinginess.

A tapping at the door and suppressed childish laughter called Katherine from her thoughts. She rose and opened the door quickly and softly.

"Hush, Cecil! be quiet, Charlie! poor grannie is asleep. Come with me downstairs; I will read to you if you like."

"Oh yes, do," said Charlie.

"I don't care for reading," cried Cecil. "Can't you play bears?"

"It makes too much noise. I will play it to-morrow if grandmamma is better. Shall I tell you a story?"

"No," said Cecil; "I will tell *you* one."

"Very well. I shall be delighted to hear it."

"I would rather have you read, auntie," said the little one.

"Never mind, Charlie; I will read to you after."

"Shall we sit in the garden? We have made it quite clean and tidy."

"No, dear; grannie would hear us there. Come into the dining-room."

Established there, the boys one on each side of her, Katherine listened to the young story-teller, who began fluently: "There was once two little boys called Jimmie and Frank. Frank was the biggest; he was very strong and very courageous; and he learned his lessons very well when he liked, but he did not always like. The two little boys had an aunt; she was nice and pleasant sometimes, but more times she was cross and disagreeable, and she spoiled Jimmie a great deal. One day they went out to walk a long way, and saw lots of [Pg 13] people riding, and Jimmie grew tired, and so did Frank, but Frank would not complain, and their aunt was so unkind that she would not call a hansom; so when they came to a great street Frank thought he would catch an omnibus, and he ran out quick—quick. He would have caught it, but his aunt was so silly and such a coward that she sent a man after him, who nearly dragged him under the feet of a horse that was coming up, and they would both have been killed if Frank had not called out to the cabman to stop."

"Oh, Cecil, that is you and I. *What* a story! Auntie is not unkind, and you did not call out," cried Charlie.

Katherine could not help laughing at the little monkey's version of the incident.